

# BEYOND FICTION

THE GREEN MAGICIAN  
by L. Sprague de Camp  
& Fletcher Pratt

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EDITED BY  
H. L. GOLD



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No. 9



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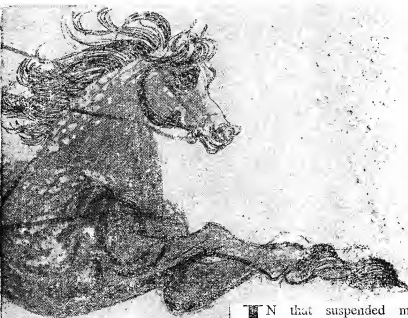
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# The Green Magician

By L. SPRAGUE de CAMP  
and FLETCHER PRATT

*In savage medieval Ireland, a druid had to know his business to save his wife's honor and his own head—and Harold Shea was still the incomplete enchanter!*



Illustrated by KOSSIN

**I**N that suspended moment when the gray mists began to whirl around them, Harold Shea realized that although the pattern was perfectly clear, the details hadn't worked out right. It was all very well to realize that,

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as Doc Chalmers once said, "The world we live in is composed of impressions received through the senses, and if the senses can be attuned to receive a different series of impressions, we should infallibly find ourselves living in another of the infinite number of possible worlds." It was a scientific and personal triumph to have proved that, by the use of the sorites of symbolic logic, the gap to one of those possible worlds could be bridged.

The trouble was what happened after you got there. It amounted to living by one's wits. Once the jump across space-time had been made, and you were in the new environment, the conditions of the surroundings had to be accepted completely. It was no good trying to fire a revolver or scratch a match or light a flashlight in the world of Norse myth—these things did not form part of the surrounding mental pattern, and remained obstinately inert masses of useless material. On the other hand, magic . . .

**T**HE mist thickened and whirled, and Shea felt the pull of his wife Belphebe's hand, clutching his own desperately. The discovery that he could work simple magic in any continuum that permitted it was quite accidental, but fully as providential as the fact that Shea's skill in fencing and his spare,

athletic figure gave him certain advantages in most of the continua he visited.

It was magic that had won him Belphebe, from the world of the *Faerie Queene*—and also magic that had landed them in their present difficulties. For you had to abide by the rules of magic as it was—wherever you landed—and Shea and Belphebe had landed in the Finnish Kalevala, to make the dismaying discovery that magical spells needed to be sung there; and Shea couldn't carry a tune across a room.

In one sense, to be sure, the expedition was a success. They had succeeded in rescuing Pete Brodsky, detective second class, from the limbo to which he had been transferred by stepping into the room when a sorites was going on. But there the success ended. Brodsky was completely unappreciative of the world of the Kalevala, and the inhabitants of that continuum were so unappreciative of their visitors that all three found themselves in a singularly dirty dungeon, facing the prospect of immediate decapitation.

It was then Shea took emergency action. There was no time to correlate the sorites with the descriptive properties of the various space-time continua. They had soared into this gray nothingness, with Shea operating generalized removal spells while Brodsky's im-

passioned rendition of *My Wild Irish Rose* provided the kind of motive power required by the laws of Kalevala magic. But it was taking an infernally long time.

Shea suddenly felt earth under his feet. Something hit him on the head and he realized that he was standing in a downpour. The rain was coming down vertically and with such intensity that he could not see more than a few yards in any direction. His first glance was toward Belphebe. She swung herself into his arms and they kissed damply.

"At least," she said, disengaging herself a little, "you are with me, my most dear lord, and so there's nought to fear."

They looked around, water running off their noses and chins. Shea's heavy woolen shirt was already so soaked that it stuck to his skin and Belphebe's neat hair was taking on a drowned rat appearance. She pointed and cried, "There's one!"

SHEA peered toward a lumpish dark mass that had a shape vaguely resembling Pete Brodsky.

"Shea?" came a call and, without waiting for a reply, the lump started toward them. As it did so, the downpour lessened and the light brightened.

"Goddam it, Shea!" said Brodsky as he approached. "What kind of box is this? If I couldn't

work my own racket better, I'd turn myself in for moper. Where the hell are we?"

"Ohio, I hope," said Shea. "And look, Shamus, we're better off than we were, right? I'm sorry about this rain, but I didn't order it."

"All I got to say is, you better be right," said Brodsky gloomily. "You can get the book thrown at you for snatching an officer, and I ain't sure I can square the rap even now. Where's the other guy?"

Shea looked around for the fellow-scientist who had accompanied them into the world of the Kalevala. "Walter may be here, but it looks as though he didn't come through with us. And if you ask me, the question is not *where* we are, but *when* we are. It wouldn't do us much good to be back in Ohio in 700 A.D., which is about the time we left. If this rain would only let up . . ."

With surprising abruptness the rain did, backing away in a wall of small but intense downpours. Spots and bars of sky appeared among the clouds, wafted along by a brisk, steady current of air that penetrated Shea's wet shirt chillingly. The sun shot an occasional beam through the clouds to touch up the landscape.

Shea and his companions were standing in deep grass, overlooking an extent of rolling ground. This stretch in turn appeared to

be the top of a plateau, falling away to the right. Mossy boulders shouldered up through the grass, which here and there gave way to patches of purple-flowered heather, while daisies nodded in the steady breeze. In the valley beyond the plateau, the lowland was covered with what appeared to be birch and oak. In the distance, as they turned to contemplate the scene, rose the crew-cropped heads of far blue mountains.

**B**RODSKY was the first to speak. "If this is Ohio, I'm a purse snatcher," he said. "Listen, Shea, do I got to tell you again you ain't got much time? If those yaps from the D.A.'s office get started on this case, you might just as well hit yourself on the head and save them the trouble. So you better get me back home before people start asking questions."

Shea said rather desperately, "Pete, I'm doing all I can. I haven't the least idea where we are, or in what period, and until I do know, I don't dare try sending us anywhere else. We've already picked up a rather high charge of magical static coming here and any spell I use without knowing what kind of magic works around here is apt to make us simply disappear or end up in Hell—you know, real red hell with flames all around, like in a funda-

mentalist church sermon."

"Okay," said Brodsky. "You got the office. Me, I don't think you got more than a week, at the outside, to get us back where we belong."

Belphebe pointed. "Marry, are those not sheep?"

Shea shaded his eyes. "Right you are, darling," he said. The objects looked like a collection of white liee on green baize, but he trusted his wife's phenomenal eyesight.

"Sheep," said Brodsky. One could almost hear the gears grind in his brain as he looked around. "Sheep!" A beatific expression spread over his face. "Shea, you must of done it! Three, two and out, we're in Ireland—and if it is, you can hit me on the head if I ever want to go back."

Shea looked around. "It does rather look like it," he said. "But when—"

Something flew past with a rush of displaced air. It struck a nearby boulder with a terrific crash and burst into fragments that whizzed about like pieces of an artillery shell.

"*Duck!*" shouted Shea, throwing himself flat and dragging Belphebe down with him.

Brodsky went into a crouch, lips drawn tight over his teeth, looking around for the source of the missile. Nothing more happened. After a moment, Shea and Belphebe got



up and went over to examine a twenty-pound hunk of sandy conglomerate.

Shea said, "Somebody is chucking hundred-pound boulders around. This may be Ireland, but I hope it isn't the time of Finn McCool or Strongbow."

"Jeez!" said Brodsky. "And me wit'out my heater. And you a shiv man with no shiv."

It occurred to Shea that at whatever period they had hit this place, he *was* in a singularly weaponless state. There was no sign of life except the distant, tiny sheep—not even a shepherd or a sheep-dog.

He sat down on a ledge of the boulder and considered. "Sweetheart," he said, addressing Belphebe, "it seems to me that whenever we are, the first thing we have to do is find people and get oriented. You're the guide. Which way?"

The girl shrugged. "My woodcraft is nought without trees," she said, "but if you put it so, I'd seek a valley, for people ever live by watercourses."

"Good idea," said Shea. "Let's go—"

*Whizz!*

Another boulder flew through the air, but not in their direction. It struck the turf a hundred yards away, bounced clumsily and rolled out of sight over the hill. Still, no one was visible.

Brodsky emitted a growl, but

Belphebe laughed. "We are encouraged to begone," she said. "Come, my lord, let us do no less."

AT that moment, another sound made itself audible. It was that of a team of horses and a vehicle with wheels in violent need of lubrication. With a drumming of hooves, a jingle of harness and a squealing of wheels, a chariot rattled up the slope and into view. It was drawn by two huge horses; one gray and one black. The chariot itself was built more on the lines of a sulky than those of the open-backed Graeco-Roman chariot, with a seat big enough for two or three persons across the back and the sides cut low in front to allow for entrance. The vehicle was ornamented with nail-heads and other trimmings in gold, and a pair of scythe-blades jutted ominously from the hubs.

The driver was a tall, thin, freckled man, with red hair trailing from under his golden fillet down over his shoulders. He wore a green kilt and, over that, a deer-skin cloak.

The chariot sped straight toward Shea and his companions, who dodged away from the scythes around the edge of the boulder. At the last instant, the charioteer reined to a walk and shouted, "Be off with you if you would keep the heads on your shoulders!"

"Why?" asked Shea.

"Because himself has a rage on. Tearing up trees and casting boulders he is, and a bad hour it will be for anyone who meets him this day."

"Who is himself?" said Shea.

Almost at the same time Brodsky said, "Who the hell are you?"

**T**HE charioteer pulled up with a look of astonishment on his face. "I am Laeg mac Rianga-bra," he said, "and who would himself be but Ulster's hound, the glory of Ireland, Cúchulainn the mighty? He is after killing his only son and has worked himself into a rage. *Ara!* It is ruining the countryside he is, and the sight of you Fomarians would make him the wilder."

The charioteer cracked his whip and the horses raced off over the curve of the hill, with flying clods dappling the sky. In the direction from which he had come, a good-sized sapling with dangling roots rose against the horizon and fell back.

"Come on!" said Shea, grabbing Belphebe's hand and starting down the slope after the chariot.

"*Hey!*" said Brodsky, tagging after them. "Come on back and pal up with this ghee. He's the number one hero of Ireland."

Another rock bounced on the sward and, from the distance, a kind of howling was audible.

"I've heard of him," said Shea; "and if you want to, we can drop in on him later. But I think right now is a poor time for calls. He isn't in a pally mood."

Belphebe said, "You name him hero and yet you say he has slain his own son. How can this be?"

"It was a bum rap," Brodsky said. "This Cúchulainn got his girl friend Aoife pregnant way back when, and then gave her the air, see? So she's sore at him, see? So when the kid grows up, she sends him to Cúchulainn under a geas—"

"A moment," said Belphebe. "What would this geas be?"

"A taboo," said Shea.

Brodsky said, "It's a hell of a lot more than that. You got one of these geasas on you and you can't do the thing it's against, even if it was to save you from the hot seat. So like I was saying, this young ghee, his name is Conla, but he has this geas on him not to tell his name or that of his father to anyone. So when Aoife sends him to Cúchulainn, the big shot challenges the kid and then knocks him off. It ain't good."

"A tale to mourn, indeed," said Belphebe. "How are you so wise in these matters, Master Pete? Are you of this race?"

"I only wisht I was," said Brodsky fervently. "It would of done me a lot of good on the force. But I ain't, see, so I doped it this way."

I studied this Irish stuff till I knew more about it than anybody. And then I got innarested, see?"

**T**HEY were well down the slope now, approaching the impassive sheep.

Belphebe said, "I trust we will come soon to where there are people. My bones protest I have not dined."

"Listen," said Brodsky, "this is Ireland, the best country in the world. If you want to feed your face, just knock off one of them sheep. It's on the house. They run the pitch that way."

"We have neither knife nor fire," said Belphebe.

"I think we can make out on the fire deal with the metal we have on us and a piece of flint," said Shea. "And if we have a sheep killed and a fire going, I'll bet it won't be long before somebody shows up with a knife to share our supper. Anyway, it's worth a try."

He walked over to a big tree and picked up a length of dead branch that lay near the base. By standing on it and heaving, he broke it somewhat raggedly in half, then handed one end to Brodsky. The resulting cudgels did not look especially efficient, but they could be made to do.

"Now," said Shea, "if we hide behind that boulder, Belphebe can circle around and drive the flock toward us."

"Would you be stealing our sheep now, darlings?" said a deep male voice.

Shea looked around. Out of nowhere, a group of men had appeared, standing on the slope above them. There were five of them, in kilts or trews, with mantles of deerskin or wolfskin fastened around their necks. One of them carried a brassbound club, one a clumsy-looking sword and the other three, spears.

Before Shea could say anything, the one with the club said, "The heads of the men will look fine in the hall, now. But I will have the woman first."

"Run!" cried Shea and took his own advice. The five ran after them.

Belphebe, being unencumbered, soon took the lead. Shea clung to his club, hating to have nothing to hit back with if he were run down. A glance backward showed that Brodsky had either dropped his or thrown it at the pursuers without effect.

"Shea!" yelled the detective. "Go on—they got me!"

They had not, as a matter of fact, but it was clear they soon would. Shea paused, turned, snatched up a stone about the size of a baseball and threw it past Brodsky's head at the pursuers. The spearman-target ducked, and they came on, spreading out in a crescent to surround their prey.

"I-can't-run no more," panted Brodsky. "Go on, kids."

"Like hell!" said Shea. "We can't go back without you. Let's both take the guy with the club."

Their stones arched through the air simultaneously. The clubman ducked, but not far enough. One missile caught his leather cap and sent him sprawling to the grass.

The others whooped and closed in with the evident intention of skewering and carving, when a terrific racket made everyone pause. Down the slope came the chariot that had passed Shea and his group before. The tall, red-haired charioteer was standing in the front, yelling something like "Ulluullu" while, balancing in the back, was a small, rather dark man.

The chariot bounded and slewed toward them. Before Shea could take in the whole action one of the hub-head scythes caught a spearman, shearing off both legs neatly, just below the knee. The man fell, shrieking, and at the same instant, the small man drew back his arm and threw a javelin right through the body of another.

"It is himself!" cried one of them and the survivors turned to run.

The small, dark fellow spoke to the charioteer, who pulled up his horses. Cúchulainn leaped down from the vehicle, took a sling from his belt and whirled it around his head. The stone struck one of the

men in the back of the neck and down he went. As the man fell, Cúchulainn wound up a second time. Shea thought this one would miss for sure, as the man was now a hundred yards away and going farther fast, but the missile hit him in the head and he pitched on his face.

"Get out the head-bag and fetch me the trophies, dear," said Cúchulainn.

## II

**L**AEG rummaged in the rear of the chariot and produced a large bag and a heavy sword, with which he went calmly to work. Belphebe had turned back, as the rescuer came toward the three. He was not only an extremely handsome man—there was also a powerful play of musculature under his loose outer garment. The hero's face bore an expression of settled and brooding melancholy, and he was dressed in a long-sleeved white cloak, embroidered with gold thread, over a red tunic.

"Thanks a lot," said Shea. "You just saved our lives. How did you happen along?"

"'Twas Laeg came to me with a tale of three strangers, who might be Fomorians by the look to them, and they were like to be set on by the Lagenians. Now I will be fighting any man in Ireland that gives me the time, but unless you

are a hero, it is not good to fight at five to two, and it is time that these pigs of Lagenians learned their manners.

"So now it is time for you to be telling me who you are and where you come from and whither bound. If you are indeed Fomorians, the better for you—King Conchobar is friends with them this year."

Shea searched his mind for details of the culture-pattern of the men of Cúchulainn's Ireland. A slip at the beginning might result in their heads being added to the collection bumping each other in Laeg's bag like so many cantaloupes. Brodsky beat him to the punch.

"Jeez!" he said, in a tone which carried its own message. "Imagine holding heavy with a zinger like you! I'm Pete Brodsky. My friends here are Harold Shea and his wife Belphebe." He stuck out his hand.

"We do not come from Fomoria, but from America, an island beyond their land," added Shea.

Cúchulainn acknowledged the introduction with a stately nod of courtesy. His eyes swept over Brodsky, and he ignored the outstretched hand. He addressed Shea. "Why do you travel in company with such a mountain of ugliness, dear?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Shea could see the cop's wattles swell dangerously. He said hastily, "He may be no beauty, but he's

useful. He's our slave and body-guard, a good fighting man."

Brodsky had sense enough to keep quiet.

Cúchulainn accepted the explanation with the same sad courtesy and gestured toward the chariot. "You will be mounting up in the back of my car and I will drive you to my camp, where there will be an eating before you set out on your journey again."

He climbed to the front of the chariot himself, while the three wanderers clambered wordlessly to the back seat. Off they went. Shea found the ride a monstrosity rough one, for the vehicle had no springs and the road was distinguished by its absence, but Cúchulainn lounged in the seat, apparently at ease.

**P**RESENTLY, there loomed ahead a small patch of woods at the bottom of a valley. Smoke rose from a fire. A score or more of men, rough and wild-looking, got to their feet and cheered as the chariot swept into the camp.

Cúchulainn sprang down lightly, acknowledged the greeting with a casual wave, then swung to Shea. "Mac Shea, I am thinking that you are of quality, and as you are not altogether the ugliest couple in the world, you will be eating with me." He waved an arm. "Bring the food, darlings."

Cúchulainn's henchmen busied themselves, with a vast amount of

shouting, running about in patterns that would have made good cats' cradles. "Do you think they'll ever get around to feeding us?" said Belphebe in a low voice. But Cúchulainn merely looked on with a slight smile, seeming to regard the performance as somehow a compliment to himself.

After an interminable amount of coming and going, Cúchulainn, with a wave of his hand, indicated that the Sheas were to sit on the ground in front of him. The charioteer, Laeg, joined them on the ground, which was still decidedly damp after the rain.

A man brought a large wooden platter on which were heaped the champion's victuals, consisting of a huge cut of boiled pork, a mass of bread and a whole salmon.

Cúchulainn laid it on his knees and set to work on it with fingers and his dagger, saying with a ghost of a smile, "Now according to the custom of Ireland, mac Shea, you may challenge the champion for his portion. A man of your inches should be a blithe swordsman, and I have never fought with an American."

"Thanks," said Shea, "but I don't think I could eat that much and anyway, there's a—what do you call it?—a geas against my fighting anyone who has done something for me, so I couldn't after the way you saved us." He addressed himself to his slab of

bread on which had been placed a pork chop and a piece of salmon, then glanced at Belphebe before he added, "Would it be too much trouble to ask for the loan of a pair of knives? We left in rather a hurry and without our tools."

A shadow flitted across the face of Cúchulainn. "It is not well for a man of his hands to be without his weapons," he said. "Are you sure, now, that they were not taken away from you?"

Belphebe said, "We came here on a magical spell and, as you doubtless know, there are some that cannot be spelled in the presence of cold iron."

"And what could be truer?" said Cúchulainn. He clapped his hands and called, "Bring two knives, darlings. The iron knives, not the bronze." He chewed, looking at Belphebe. "And where would you be journeying to, darlings?"

Shea said, "Back to America, I suppose. We sort of—dropped in to see the greatest hero in Ireland."

CÚCHULAINN appeared to take the compliment as a matter of course. "You come at a poor time. The expedition is over, and now I am going home to sit quietly with my wife Emer, so there will be no fighting."

Laeg looked up with his mouth full and said, "You will be quiet if the meddling Maev and Ailill will let you, Cucuc."

"When my time comes to be killed by the Connachta, then I will be killed by the men of Connacht," said Cúchulainn composedly. He was still looking at Belphebe.

Belphebe said, "Who stands at the head of the magical art here?"

Cúchulainn said, "None is greater, nor will be, than Ulster's Cathbadh, adviser to King Conchobar. And now you will rest and fit yourselves, and in the morning we will go to Muirtheinne to see Emain Macha." He laid aside his empty platter and took another look at Belphebe.

"That's extremely kind of you," said Shea. It was so very kind that he felt a twinge of suspicion.

"It is not," said Cúchulainn. "For those with the gift of beauty, it is no more than their due that they should receive all courtesy."

He was still looking at Belphebe, who glanced up at the darkening sky. "My lord," she said, "I am somewhat foredone. Would it not be well to seek our rest?"

Shea said, "It's an idea. Where do we sleep?"

Cúchulainn waved a hand toward the grove. "Where you will, darlings. No one will disturb you in the camp of Cúchulainn." He clapped his hands. "Gather moss for the bed of my friends."

When they were alone, Belphebe said in a low voice, "I like not the manner of his approach,

though he has done us great good. Cannot you use your art to transport us back to Ohio?"

Shea said, "I'll take a chance on trying to work out the sorites in the morning. Remember, it won't do us any good to get back alone. We've got to take Pete with us or we'll be up on a charge of kidnapping or murdering him, and I don't want to go prowling through this place at night looking for him."

EARLY as they rose, the camp was already astir. While Shea and Belphebe wandered through the camp, looking for Brodsky, they noted it was strangely silent. Shea grabbed the arm of a be-whiskered desperado hurrying by to inquire the reason.

The man bent close and said in a fierce whisper: "Sure 'tis that himself is in his sad mood. If you would lose your head, it would be just as well to make a noise."

"There's Pete," said Belphebe.

The detective waved a hand and came toward them from under the trees. He had somehow acquired one of the deerskin cloaks, which was held under his chin with a brass brooch, and he looked unexpectedly cheerful.

"What's the office?" he asked in the same stage whisper the others were using.

"Come with us," said Shea. "We're going to try to get back to

Ohio. Where'd you get the new clothes?"

"Aw, one of these muzzlers thought he could wrestle, so I slipped him a little jujitsu and won it. Listen, Shea, I ain't going back. This is the real McCoy."

"But we want to go back," said Belphebe, "and you told us just yesterday that if we showed up without you, our fate would be less than pleasant."

"Give it a rest. I'm on the legit here, and with that magical stuff of yours, you could be, too. At least, I want to stay for the big blow."

"Come this way," said Shea, moving away from the center of the camp to where there was less danger of their voices causing trouble. "What do you mean by the big blow?"

"From what I got," said Pete, "I figured out this Maev and Ailill are rustling out the mob and heeling them up to give Cúchulainn a bang on the head. They got all the consins of people he's ever bumped off in on the caper, and that will make him go up against them all at once—and then, boom. I want to stay for the pay-off."

"Look here," said Shea, "you said only yesterday that we had to get you back within a week. Remember? It was something about your probably being seen going into our house and not coming out."

"Sure, sure. And if we go back, I'll alibi you. But what for? I'm teaching these guys to wrestle, and with your magic, maybe you could even take the geas off the big shot."

"Perhaps I could," said Shea. "It seems to amount to a kind of psychological compulsion by magical means. Between psychology and magic, I ought to make it. But I daren't take the chance with our hero making eyes at Belphebe."

They emerged from the clump of trees and were at the edge of the slope, with the early sun just touching the tops of the branches above them. Shea went on, "I'm sorry, Pete, but Belphebe and I don't want to spend the rest of our lives here. Now, you two hold hands. Give me your other hand, Belphebe."

Brodsky obeyed with a sullen expression. Shea closed his eyes and began, "If either A or (B or C) is true, and C or D is false . . ." motioning with his free hand up to the end of the sorites.

HE opened his eyes again. They were still at the edge of a clump of trees, on a hill in Ireland, watching the smoke from the camp fire as it rose above the trees to catch the sunshine.

Belphebe said, "What appears to be amiss?"

"I don't *know*," said Shea desperately. "Wait a minute. Making



this work depends on a radical alteration of sense impressions in accordance with the rules of symbolic logic and magic. Now we know that magic works here, so that can't be the trouble. But for symbolic logic to be effective, you have to submit to its effects—that is, be willing. Pete, you're the villain. You don't want to go back."

"Don't put the squeeze on me," said Brodsky. "I'll play ball."

"All right. Now remember. you're going back to Ohio and you have a good job there and you like it. Besides, you were sent out to find us and you did. Okay?"

They joined hands again and Shea, constricting his brow with effort, ran through the sorites again. As he reached the end, time seemed to stand still for a second. Then—*crash!* A flash of vivid blue lightning struck the tree nearest them, splitting it from top to bottom.

Belphebe gave a little squeal, and a chorus of excited voices rose from the camp.

Shea gazed at the fragments of the splintered tree and said soberly, "I think that shot was meant for us, and that just about tears it, sweetheart. Pete, you get your wish. We're going to have to stay here, at least until I know more about the laws controlling magic in this continuum."

Two or three of Cúchulainn's

men burst excitedly through the trees and came toward them, spears ready.

"Is it all right that you are?" one of them called.

"Just practicing a little magic," said Shea easily. "Come on, let's go back and join the others."

In the clearing, voices were no longer quenched. Cúchulainn stood watching the loading of the chariot, with a lofty and detached air. As the three travelers approached, he said, "Now it is to you I am grateful, mac Shea, with your magical spell for reminding me that things are better done at home than abroad. It is leaving at once we are."

"Hey!" said Brodsky. "I ain't had no breakfast."

The hero regarded him with distaste. "You will be telling me that I should postpone the journey for the condition of a slave's belly?" he said and, turning to Shea and Belphebe, added, "We can eat as we go."

THE ride was smoother than the one of the previous day only because the horses went at a walk so as not to outdistance the column of retainers on foot. Conversation over the squeaking of the wheels began by being sparse and rather boring. But Cúchulainn apparently liked Belphebe's comments on the beauty of the landscape and began addressing her with an

exclusiveness that Shea found disturbing.

The country around them got lower and flatter until, from the tops of the few rises, Shea glimpsed a sharp line of gray-blue across the horizon—the sea. Cultivation became more common, though there was still less of it than pasturage. Occasionally a lumpish-looking serf, clad in a length of ragged sacking-like cloth and a thick veneer of dirt, left off his labors to stare at the band and wave a languid greeting.

At last, over the manes of the horses, Shea saw that they were approaching a stockade of logs with a huge double gate.

Belphebe surveyed it critically and whispered behind her hand to Shea, "It could be taken with fire-arrows."

"I don't think they have many archers or very good ones," he whispered back. "Maybe you can show them something."

The gate was pushed open creakingly by more bearded warriors, who shouted, "Good day to you, Cucuc! Good luck to Ulster's hound!"

As the chariot rumbled through the opening, Shea glimpsed houses of various shapes and sizes, some of them evidently stables and barns. The biggest was the hall in the middle, its heavily thatched roof sloping down almost to the ground at the sides.

L AEG pulled up. Cúchulainn jumped down, waved his hand and cried, "Muirthemne welcomes you, Americans!" All the others applauded, as though he had said something particularly witty and brilliant.

He turned to speak to a fat man, rather better dressed than the rest, when another man came out of the main hall and walked rapidly toward them. The newcomer was thin, of medium height, with a long, white beard, slightly bent and carrying a stick on which he leaned now and again. A purple robe covered him impressively from neck to ankle.

"The best of the day to you, Cathbadh," said Cúchulainn. "This is surely a happy hour that brings you here, but where is my darling Emer?"

"Emer has gone to Emain Macha," said Cathbadh. "Conchobar summoned her—"

"Ara!" shouted Cúchulainn. "Is it a serf that I am, that the King can send for my wife every least last time he takes it into the head of him?"

"It is not that at all, at all," said Cathbadh. "He summons you, too, and for that he sent me instead of Levarcham, for he knows you might not heed her word if you took it into that willful head of yours to disobey, whereas it is myself can put a geas on you to go."

"And why does himself want us at Emain Macha?"

"Would I be knowing all the secrets in the heart of a King?"

Shea said, "Are you the court druid?"

Cathbadh became aware of him for the first time, and Cúchulainn made introductions. Shea explained, "It seems to me that the King might want you at the court for your own protection, so the druids can keep Maev's sorcerers from putting a spell on you. That's what she plans to do."

"How do you know of this?" asked Cathbadh with interest.

"Through Pete here. He sometimes knows about things that are going to happen before they actually take place. In our country we call it second sight."

Cúchulainn wrinkled his nose and said, "That ugly slave?"

"Yeah, *me!*" said Brodsky, who had approached the group. "And you better watch your step, handsome, because somebody's going to hang you up to dry unless you do something about it."

"If it is destined, none can alter it," said Cúchulainn. "Fergus! Have the bathwater heated." He turned to Shea. "Once you are properly washed and garbed you will look well enough for the board in my beautiful house. I will lend you some proper garments, for I cannot bear the sight of those Formorianlike rags."

### III

**A** LONG the side of the main hall was an alcove made of screens of wattle, set at an angle which provided privacy for those within. In the alcove stood Cúchulainn's bathtub, a large and elaborate affair of bronze. A procession of the women of the manor were now coming from the well with jugs of water, which they emptied into the tub. Meanwhile, the men were poking up the fire at the end of the hall and adding stones of about five to ten pounds' weight.

Brodsky sidled up to Shea, as they stood in the half-light, orienting themselves. "Listen," he said, "I don't want to blow the whistle on a bum rap, but you better watch it. The racket they have here, this guy can make a pass at Belphebe in his own house, and it's legit."

"I was afraid of that," said Shea, unhappily.

"Give me time," Brodsky said. "I'll try to think of some way to rumble his line."

"*Make way!*" shouted a huge, whiskered retainer. The three dodged as the man ran past them, carrying a large stone, still smoking from the fire, in a pair of tongs. The man dashed into the alcove. There were a splash and a loud hiss. Another retainer followed with a second stone, while

the first was on his return trip. In a few minutes, all the stones had been transferred to the bathtub. Shea looked around the screen and saw that the water was steaming gently.

Cúchulainn sauntered into the alcove and tested the water with an inquisitive finger. "That will do, dears," he said.

The retainers picked the stones out of the water with their tongs and piled them in the corner, then went around from behind the screen.

Cúchulainn reached up to pull off his tunic, then saw Shea. "I am going to undress for the bath," he said. "Surely, you would not be wanting to remain here, now."

Shea turned back into the main room just in time to see Brodsky smack one fist into the other palm. "Got it!" he said.

"Got what?" said Shea.

"How to needle this hot tomato." He looked around, then pulled Shea and Belphebe closer. "Listen, the big shot putting the scam on you now just reminded me. The minute he makes a serious pass at you, Belle, what you gotta do is go into a strip-tease. In public, where everybody can get a gander at it."

Belphebe gasped.

Shea said, "Are you out of your head? That sounds to me like trying to put a fire out with gasoline."

"I tell you, he can't take it!" Brodsky's voice was low but urgent. "They can't none of them. One time, when this guy was going to put the slug on everyone at the court, the King sent out a bunch of babes with bare topsides and they nearly had to pick him up in a basket."

"I like this not," said Belphebe, but Shea said, "A nudity taboo! That could be part of a culture pattern, all right. Do they all have it?"

"Yeah, and good," said Brodsky. "They even croak of it."

CUCHULAINN stepped out of the alcove, buckling a belt around a fresh tunic, emerald-green with embroidery of golden thread. He scrubbed his long hair with a towel and ran a comb through it, while Laeg took his place behind the wattle screen.

Belphebe said, "Is there to be but one water for all?"

Cúchulainn said, "There is plenty of soapwort. Cleanliness befits beauty." He glanced at Brodsky. "The slave can bathe in the trough outside."

"Listen . . ." began Brodsky, but Shea put a hand on his arm and, to cover up, said, "Do your druids use spells of transportation—from one place to another?"

"There is little a good druid cannot do. But I would advise you not to use the spells of Cathbadh

unless you are a hero as well as a maker of magic."

He turned to watch the preparations for dinner with somber satisfaction. Laeg presently appeared, his toilet made, and from another direction one of the women brought garments for Shea and Belphebe. Shea started to follow his wife, but remembered what Brodsky had said about the taboo and decided not to take a chance on shocking his hosts. She came out soon enough in a floor-length gown that clung to her all over, and he noted with displeasure that it was the same green and embroidery pattern as Cúchulainn's tunic.

His own costume, after he had dealt with water almost cold and a towel already damp, turned out to be a saffron tunic and tight knitted scarlet trews which he imagined as looking quite effective.

Belphebe was watching the women around the fire. Over in the shadows under the eaves sat Pete Brodsky, cleaning his fingernails with a bronze knife; a chunky, middle-aged man—a good hand in a fight, with his knowledge of jujitsu and his quick reflexes. Things would be a lot easier, though, if he hadn't fouled up the spell by wanting to stay where he was. Or had that been responsible?

Old Cathbadh came stumping

up with his stick. "Mac Shea," he said, "the Little Hound is after telling me that you also are a druid who came here by magical arts from a distant place and can summon lightning from the skies."

"It's true enough," said Shea. "Doubtless you know those spells."

"Doubtless I do," said Cathbadh, looking sly. "We must hold converse on matters of our craft. We will be teaching each other some new spells, I am thinking."

Shea frowned. The only spell he was really interested in was one that would take Belphebe and himself—and Pete—back to Garaden, Ohio, and Cathbadh probably didn't know that one himself. He said, "I think we can be quite useful to each other. In America, where I come from, we have worked out some of the general principles of magic, so that it is only necessary to learn the procedures in various places."

**J**UST then Cúchulainn came out of his private room and sat down without ceremony at the head of the table. The others gathered round. Laeg took the place at one side of the hero and Cathbadh at the other. Shea and Belphebe were nodded to the next places, opposite each other.

Cúchulainn said to Cathbadh, "Will you make the sacrifice, dear?"

The druid stood up, spilled

some wine on the floor and chanted to the gods, Bilé, Danu and Lér. Shea decided it was only imagination that he was hearing the sound of beating wings, and only the approach of the meal that gave him a powerful sense of internal comfort—but there was no doubt that Cathbadh knew his stuff.

Cathbadh knew it, too. "Was that not fine now?" he said, as he sat down next to Shea. "Can you show me anything in your outland magic ever so good?"

Shea thought it wouldn't do any harm to give the old codger a small piece of sympathetic magic. He said, "Move your wine cup over next to mine, and then watch it carefully."

There would have to be a spell to link the two if he were to make Cathbadh's wine disappear as he drank his own. The only one he could think of at the moment was the "Double, double" from *Macbeth*, so he murmured that under his breath, making the hand passes he had learned in Faerie.

Then he said, "Now watch," picked up his mug and set it to his lips.

*Whoosh!*

Out of Cathbadh's cup a geyser of wine leaped as though driven by a pressure hose, nearly reaching the ceiling before descending in a rain of glittering drops.

Cathbadh was a fast worker. He lifted his stick and struck the hurrying stream of liquid, crying something unintelligible in a high voice. Abruptly, the gusher was quenched and there was only the table, swimming with wine, and serv-women rushing to mop up the mess.

Cúchulainn said, "This is a very beautiful piece of magic, mac Shea, and it is a pleasure to have so notable a druid among us. But you would not be making fun of us, would you?" He looked dangerous.

"Not me," said Shea. "I only—"

Whatever he intended to say was cut off by a sudden burst of unearthly howling from outside. Shea glanced around rather wildly, feeling that things were getting out of hand, but Cúchulainn said, "You need not be minding that at all now. It will only be Uath, and because the moon has reached her term."

"I don't understand," said Shea.

"The women of Ulster were not good enough for Uath, so he must be going to Connacht and courting the daughter of Ollgath, the druid. This Ollgath is no very polite man. He said no Ultonian should have his daughter and, when Uath persisted, he put a geas on Uath that, when the moon fills, he must howl the night out, and a geas on his own daughter that she cannot abide the sound of howling. I am thinking that

Ollgaeth's head is due for a place of honor."

Shea said, "But I still don't understand. If you can put a geas on someone, can't it be taken off again?"

Cúchulainn looked mournful, Cathbadh embarrassed and Laeg laughed. The charioteer said, "Now you will be making Cathbadh sad and our dear Cucuc is too polite to tell you—but the fact is no other than that Ollgaeth is so good a druid that no one can lift the spells he lays, nor lay one he cannot lift."

Outside, Uath's mournful howl rose again. Cúchulainn said to Belphebe, "Does he trouble you, dear? I can have him removed, or the upper part of him."

AS the meal progressed, Shea noticed that Cúchulainn was putting away an astonishing quantity of the wine, talking almost exclusively with Belphebe, although the drink did not seem to have much effect on the hero. When the table was cleared Belphebe nodded significantly.

He got up and ran around the table to place a hand on her shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pete Brodsky getting up, too. Cúchulainn's face bore the faintest of smiles. "It is sorry to discommode you I am," he said, "but this is by the rules and not even a challenging matter. So

now, Belphebe, darling, you will just come to my room."

He got up and started toward Belphebe, who got up, too, backing away. Shea racked his brain hopelessly for some kind of spell that might stop this business. Everyone else was standing up to watch the little drama.

Cúchulainn said, "Now you would not be getting in my way, would you, mac Shea, darling?" His voice was gentle, but there was something incredibly ferocious in the way he uttered the words.

Behind and to the left of Shea, Brodsky's voice rose, "Belle, you stiff, do like I told you!"

She turned back as Cúchulainn drew nearer and, with set face, crossed her arms and whipped the green gown off over her head. There she stood in her wispy bra and panties.

There was a simultaneous gasp and groan of horror from the audience.

"Go on!" yelled Brodsky in the background. "Give it the business!" He emphasized his meaning with a wolf-whistle.

Belphebe reached behind her to unhook her brassiere. Cúchulainn staggered as though he had been struck. He threw one arm across his eyes, reached the table and brought his face down on it, pounding the wood with the other fist.

"Ara!" he shouted. "Take her





away! Is it killing me you will be and in my own hall, and me your host that has saved your life?"

"Will you let her alone?" asked Shea.

"I will that, for the night."

"Mac Shea, take his offer," advised Laeg from the head of the table. He looked rather greenish himself. "If his rage comes on him, none of us will be safe."

"Okay," said Shea and held Belphebe's dress for her.

Cúchulainn staggered to his feet. "It is not feeling well that I am, darlings," he said and, picking up the golden ewer of wine, made for his room.

#### IV

**T**HERE was excited gabble among the retainers as Belphebe walked back to her place without looking to right or left, but they made room for Shea and Brodsky to join her.

The druid looked shrewdly at the closed door and said, "If the Little Hound drinks too much by himself he may be brooding on the wrong you are after doing him, and a sad day that would be. If he comes out with the hero-light playing round his head, run for your lives."

Belphebe said, "But where would we go?"

"Back to your own place. Where else?"

Shea frowned. "I'm not sure—" he began, when Brodsky cut in suddenly. "Say," he said, "your boss ain't really got no right to get bugged up. We had to play it that way."

Cathbadh swung to him. "And why, serf?"

"Don't call me serf. She's got a fierce geas on her. Any guy besides her husband that touches her gets a bellyache and dies of it. And Shea only stands for it because he's a magician. It's lucky we put the brakes on before he got her in that room, or he'd be ready for the lilies right now."

Cathbadh's eyebrows shot up like a seagull taking off. "Himself should know of this," he said. "There would be less bloodshed in Ireland if more people opened their mouths to explain things before they put their feet in them."

He got up, went to the bedroom door and knocked. There was a growl from within. Cathbadh entered and, a few minutes later, came out with Cúchulainn. The latter's step was visibly unsteady and his melancholy seemed to have deepened. He walked to the head of the table and sat down in the chair again.

"Sure, and this is the saddest tale in the world I'm hearing about your wife having such a bad geas on her. The evening is spoilt and all. I hope the black fit does not come on me now, for then

it will be blood and death I'll need to restore me."

There were a couple of audible gasps and Laeg looked alarmed, but Cathbadh said hastily, "The evening is not so spoilt as you think, Cucuc. This mac Shea is evidently a very notable druid and spellmaker, but I think I am a better. Did you notice how quickly I put down his wine fountain? Would it not lift your heart now, to see the two of us engage in a contest of magic?"

Cúchulainn clapped his hands. "Never was truer word spoken."

Shea said, "I'm afraid I can't guarantee—" but Belphebe plucked his sleeve and, with her head close to his, whispered, "Do it. There is a danger here."

"It isn't working right," Shea whispered back.

**O**UTSIDE rose the mournful sound of Uath's howling. "Can you not use your psychology on him out there?" the girl asked. "It will be magic to them."

"A real psychoanalysis would take days," said Shea. "Wait a minute, though—we seem to be in a world where the hysteric type is the norm. That means a high suggestibility. We might get something out of post-hypnotic suggestion."

Cúchulainn, from the head of the table, said, "It is not all night we have to wait." There was a

note of menace in his voice.

Shea turned around and said aloud, "How would it be if I took the geas off that character out there? I understand that's something Cathbadh hasn't been able to do."

Cathbadh said, "If you can do this, it will be a thing worth seeing."

"All right," said Shea. "Bring him in."

"Laeg, dear, go get us Uath," said Cúchulainn. He took a drink, looked at Belphebe and his expression became morose again.

Shea said, "Let's see. I want a small bright object. May I borrow one of your rings, Cúchulainn? That one with the big stone would do nicely."

Cúchulainn slid the ring down the table as Laeg returned, firmly gripping the arm of a stocky young man, who seemed to be opposing some resistance to the process. Just as they got in the door, Uath flung back his head and emitted a bloodcurdling howl. Laeg dragged him forward.

Shea turned to the others. "If this magic is going to work, I'll need a little room. Don't come too near us while I'm spinning the spell, or you may be caught in it, too." He arranged a pair of seats well back from the table and attached a thread to the ring.

Laeg pushed Uath into one of the seats. "That's a bad geas you

have there, Uath," said Shea, "and I want you to cooperate with me in getting rid of it. You'll do everything I tell you, won't you?"

The man nodded. Shea lifted the ring, said, "Watch this," and began twirling the thread back and forth between thumb and forefinger, so that the ring rotated first one way and then the other, sending out a flickering gleam of reflection from the rushlights. Meanwhile, Shea talked to Uath in a low voice, saying, "Sleep," now and then in the process. Behind him, he could hear an occasionally caught breath and could almost feel the atmosphere of suspense.

Uath went rigid.

Shea said in a low voice, "Can you hear me, Uath?"

"That I can."

"You will do what I say."

"That I will."

"When you wake up, you won't suffer from this howling geas any more."

"That I will not."

"To prove that you mean it, the first thing you do on waking will be to clap Laeg on the shoulder."

"That I will."

**S**HEA repeated his directions several times, varying the words, and making Uath repeat them after him. At last he brought him out of the hypnotic trance with a snap of the fingers and a sharp, "Wake up!"

Uath stared about him with an air of bewilderment. Then he got up, walked over to the table and slapped Laeg on the shoulder. There was an appreciative murmur from the audience.

Shea said, "How do you feel, Uath?"

"It is just fine that I am feeling. I do not want to be howling at the moon at all now, and I'm thinking the geas is gone for good. I thank your honor." He came down the table, seized Shea's hand and kissed it, then joined the other retainers at the lower part of the table.

Cathbadh said, "That is a very good magic, indeed, and not the least of it was the small geas you put on him to lay his hand on Laeg's shoulder. And true it is that I have been unable to lift this spell. But as one man can run faster, so can another one climb faster, and I will demonstrate by taking the geas off your wife, which you have evidently not been able to deal with."

"I'm not sure—" began Shea, doubtfully.

"Let not yourself be worried," said Cúchulainn. "It will not harm her at all and, in the future, she can be more courteous in the high houses she visits."

The druid rose and pointed a long, bony finger at Belphebe. He chanted some sort of rhythmic affair, which began in a gibberish

of unknown language, but became more and more intelligible, ending with, “. . . and by oak, ash and yew, by the beauty of Aengus and the strength of Lér, and by authority as high druid of Ulster, let this geas be lifted from you, Belphebe! Let it pass! *Out* with it!”

He tossed up his arms and then sat down. “How do you feel, darling?”

“In good sooth, not much different than before,” said Belphebe. “Should I?”

Cúchulainn said, “But how can we know that the spell has worked? *Aha!* I have it! Come with me.” He rose, came around the table and, in response to Shea’s exclamation of fury and Belphebe’s of dismay, added, “Only as far as the door. Have I not given you my word?”

He bent over Belphebe, put one arm around her and reached for her hand, then reeled back, clutching his stomach with both hands and gasping for breath. Cathbadh and Laeg were on their feet. So was Shea.

Cúchulainn staggered against Laeg’s arm, wiped a sleeve across his eyes and said, “Now the American is the winner, since your removal spell has failed, and it was like to be the death of me that the touch of her was. Do you be trying it yourself, Cathbadh, dear.”

The druid reached out and laid

a cautious finger on Belphebe’s arm.

Nothing happened.

**L**AEG said, “Did not the serf say that a magician was proof against this geas?”

Cathbadh said, “You may have the right of it there, but I am thinking myself there is another reason. Cucuc wished to take her to his bed, while I was not thinking of that at all, at all.”

Cúchulainn sat down again and addressed Shea. “A good thing it is, indeed, that I was protected from the work of this geas. Has it not proved obstinate even to the druids of your own country?”

“Very,” said Shea. “I wish I could find someone who could deal with it.” If possible, he had been more surprised than Cúchulainn by the latter’s attack of cramps, but in the interval he had figured it out. Belphebe hadn’t had any geas on her in the first place. Therefore, when Cathbadh tried to remove the spell, it took the opposite effect of laying on her a very good geas indeed. He felt rather grateful to Cathbadh.

Cathbadh said, “In America, there may be none to deal with such a matter, but in Ireland there is a man both bold and clever enough to lift the spell.”

“Who’s he?” asked Shea.

“That will be Ollgaeth of Cruachan, at the court of Ailill and

Maev, who put the geas on Uath."

Brodsky from beside Shea spoke up. "He's the guy that's going to put one on Cúchulainn before the big mob takes him."

"*Wurra!*" said Cathbadh to Shea. "Your slave must have a second mind to go with his second sight. The last time he spoke, it would only be a spell that Ollgaeth would be putting on the Little Hound."

"Listen, punk," said Brodsky in a tone of exasperation, "get the stones out of your head. This is the pitch—this Maev and Ailill are mobbing up everybody that owes Cúchulainn here a score—and when they get them all together, they're going to put a geas on him that will make him fight them all at once, and it's too bad."

Cathbadh combed his beard with his fingers. "If this be true . . ." he began.

"It's the McCoy."

"I was going to say that, if it be true, it is high tidings from a low source. Nor do I see precisely how it may be dealt with."

Cúchulainn said with mournful and slightly alcoholic gravity, "I would fight them all without the geas, but if I am fated to fall, then that is an end of me."

Cathbadh turned to Shea. "You see the trouble we have with himself. Does your second sight reach farther, slave?"

Brodsky said, "Okay, lug, you

asked for it. After Cúchulainn gets rubbed out, there'll be a war and practically everybody in the act gets knocked off, including you and Ailill and Maev. How do you like that?"

"As little as I like the look of your face," said Cathbadh. He addressed Shea. "Can this foretelling be trusted?"

"I've never known him to be wrong."

CATHBADH glanced from one to the other till one could almost hear his brains rumbling. Then he said, "I am thinking, mac Shea, that you will be having business at Ailill's court."

"What gives you such an idea?"

"You will be wanting to see Ollgaeth in this matter of your wife's geas, of course. A wife with a geas like that is like one with a bad eye—and you can never be happy until it is removed entirely. You will take your slave with you, and he will tell his tale and let Maev know that we know of her schemings, and they will be no more use than trying to feed a boar on bracelets."

Brodsky snapped his fingers and said, "Take him up," in a heavy whisper. But Shea said, "Look here, I'm not at all sure that I want to go to Ailill's court."

"I will even be going with you to see that you are properly received," said Cathbadh.

It struck Shea that this druid was extremely anxious to get him into a spot that might be dangerous. He said, "We can take a night to sleep on it and decide in the morning. Where do we sleep?"

"Finn will show you to a chamber," said Cúchulainn. "Myself and Cathbadh will be staying up the while." He smiled his charming and melancholy smile.

Finn guided the couple to a guest room at the back of the building, handed Shea a rushlight and closed the door, as Belphebe put up her arms to be kissed.

The next second, Shea was doubled up and knocked flat to the floor by a super-edition of the cramps that had seized Cúchulainn.

**B**ELPHEBE bent over him. "Are you hurt, Harold?"

He pulled himself to a sitting posture with his back against the wall. "Not—seriously," he gasped. "It's that geas—it doesn't take time out for husbands."

The girl considered. "Could you not relieve me of it as you did the one who howled?"

Shea said, "I can try. But I can pretty well tell in advance that it won't work. Your personality is too tightly integrated—just the opposite of these hysterics around here."

"You might do it by magic."

Shea scrambled the rest of the way to his feet. "Not till I know

more. Haven't you noticed I've been getting an overcharge—first that stroke of lightning and then the wine fountain? There's something in this continuum that seems to reverse my kind of magic."

She laughed a little. "If that's the law, why, there's an end. You have but to summon Pete and make a magic that would call for us to stay here, then — hey, presto!—we are returned."

"I don't dare take the chance, sweetheart. It might work and it might not—and even if it did, you'd be apt to wind up in Ohio with that geas still on you, and then we really would be in trouble."

There was a tap at the door. "Who is it?" called Belphebe.

"It's me—Pete."

As Shea opened, the detective slipped in and said, "Listen, I ain't got much time, but I gotta wise you up, see? Watch your step with this Cathbadh. The gang were telling me he's really bugged up at you for beating him on that geas deal. The only reason he doesn't send you to the cleaners right away is he's afraid of your kind of magic and wants to get wised up about it."

"Oh, Lord!" said Shea. "All the same, I don't see how we can avoid going with him to see Ollgaeth."

On top of that he had to sleep on the floor.

**H**AROLD Shea, Belphebe, Cathbadh and Pete Brodsky rode steadily across the central plain of Ireland. Their accouterments included serviceable broadswords at the hips of Shea and Brodsky and a neat dagger at Belphebe's belt. Her request for a bow had brought forth only miserable sticks that pulled weakly and were quite useless beyond a range of fifty yards. These she had refused.

The first day, they followed the winding course of the Erne for some miles and splashed across it at a ford, then struck the boglands of western Cavan. Cathbadh appeared astonished at Brodsky's identifications of landmarks, but if he was really peeved at Shea, he did not show it, and his conversation even amused Belphebe.

By nightfall, they had covered at least half their journey. As they camped, with Belphebe busy at the fire, and the druid and Shea sitting against trees, Cathbadh said, "If it were me now, and I had the magic of the Americans, I would be doing a bit of it, and all this trouble of cooking would be saved."

Shea said, "But I like my wife's cooking."

"Not to be mentioning," said Cathbadh, as though he had not heard, "that a magician who calls

lightning from the skies and comes here on a spell should be able to transport us to Cruachain without any trouble of riding at all, at all."

He was clearly fishing. Shea said, "That's an idea. I think maybe between the two of us, we could work it. How about—"

Brodsky said suddenly, "Bag your head."

"—consulting with Allgaeth when we get there and seeing if we can't work out some good transportation magic," Shea finished smoothly.

Afterward, he got Brodsky aside and asked him, "Why the warning?"

"Listen," said Pete. "I'm a dick, see? I think I got this jerk's time. While we were riding back there, he wanted me to mob up with him and make prophecies. I'm telling you it ain't good. Nix him on everything."

"I see," said Shea. "Thanks—I'll try to be careful."

**M**ORNING showed mountains on their right, with a round peak in the midst of them. The journey went more slowly than on the previous day, principally because they had not yet developed riding callouses. They pulled up for the evening at the hut of a peasant rather more prosperous than the rest, and Brodsky more than paid for their food and lodging with tales out of Celtic myth.

The following day woke in rain and, though the peasant assured them Rath Cruachain was no more than a couple of hours' ride distant, the group became involved in fog and drizzle, so that it was not till afternoon that they skirted Loch Key and came to Magh Ai, the Plain of Livers.

There were about as many of the buildings as would constitute an incorporated village in their own universe, surrounded by the usual stockade and wide gate—unmistakably Cruachain of the Poets, the capital of Connacht.

At the gate of the stockade was a pair of hairy soldiers, but their spears were leaning against the posts and they were too engrossed in a game of knuckle-bones even to look up as the party rode through.

A number of people were moving about, most of whom paused to stare at Brodsky, who had flatly refused to discard the pants of his brown business suit and was evidently not dressed for the occasion.

The big house was built of heavy oak beams and had wooden shingles instead of the usual thatch. Shea stared with interest at windows with real glass in them, even though the panes were little diamond-shaped pieces half the size of a hand and far too irregular to see through.

There was a doorkeeper with a beard badly in need of trimming.

Shea got off his horse and advanced to him, saying, "I am mac Shea, a traveler from beyond the island of the Fomorians, with my wife and bodyguard. May we have an audience with their majesties, and their great druid, Ollgaeth?"

The doorkeeper inspected the party with care and then grinned. "I am thinking," he said, "that your honor will please the Queen with your looks and your lady will please himself, so you had best go along in. But this ugly lump of a bodyguard will please neither, and as they are very sensitive, he had best stay with your mounts."

Shea glanced around in time to see Brodsky replace his expression of fury with the carefully cultivated blank look that policemen use under cross-examination, then helped Belphebe off her horse.

**I**NSIDE, the main hall stretched away with the usual swords and spears in the usual places on the wall, and the usual rack of heads. In the middle, surrounded by retainers and soldiers, stood an oak dais, ornamented with strips of bronze and silver. It held two big carved armchairs, in which lounged, rather than sat, the famous sovereigns of Connacht.

Maev, who might have been in her early forties, was still strikingly beautiful, with a long, pale, unlined face, pale blue eyes and yellow hair hanging in long braids.



For a blonde without the aid of cosmetics, she had remarkably red lips.

King Ailill was a less impressive figure than his consort. Some inches shorter, fat and paunchy, with small close-set eyes and a straggly pepper-and-salt beard, he seemed unable to keep his fingers still.

A young man in a blue kilt, wearing a silver-hilted shortsword over a tunic embroidered with gold thread, seemed to be acting as usher to make sure that nobody got to the royal couple out of turn. He spotted the newcomers at once and worked his way toward them.

"Will you be seeking an audience, or have you come merely to look at the greatest King in Ireland?" he asked. His eyes ran appreciatively over Belphebe's contours.

Shea identified himself, adding, "We have come to pay our respects to the King and Queen—ah . . ."

"Maine mac Aililla, Maine mo Eperit," said the young man.

This would be one of the numerous sons of Ailill and Maev, who had all been given the same name. But he stood in their path without moving.

"Can we speak to them?" Shea said.

Maine mo Eperit put back his head and looked down an aristocratic nose. "Since you are for-

eigners, you are evidently not knowing that it is the custom in Connacht to have a present for the man who brings you before the King. But I will be forgiving your ignorance." He smiled a charming smile.

Shea looked at Belphebe and she returned a glance of dismay. Their total current possessions consisted of what they stood in. "But we have to see them," he said. "It may be important to them as well as to us."

Maine mo Eperit smiled again.

Shea said, "How about a nice broadsword?" and pushed forward his hilt.

"I have a better one," said Maine mo Eperit exasperatingly. "If it were a jewel now . . ."

Shea looked around. Cathbadh seemed to have disappeared. "Ollgaeth, the druid, is at the court, isn't he?"

"It is a rule that he will see none but those the Queen sends to him."

Shea felt like whipping out his sword and taking a crack at him. Suddenly, Belphebe from beside him said, "Jewels have we none, sirrah, but from your glances, there is something you would prize more. I am sure that, in accordance with your custom, my husband would be glad to loan me to you for the night."

Shea gasped, then remembered. That geas she had acquired could be handy as well as troublesome.

But it had better not be removed till morning.

Maine mo Epert's smile turned into a grin that made Shea want more than ever to swat him, but the young man clapped his hands and began to push people aside.

Shea had just time to whisper, "Nice work, kid," when the usher pushed a couple of people from the end of a bench and sat them down in the front row, facing the royal pair. At the moment a couple of spearmen were holding a serf and giving evidence that he had stolen a pork chop.

Maev looked at Ailill, who said, "Ahem—since the lout was starving, perhaps we ought to exercise mercy and let him off with the loss of a hand."

"Do not be a fool," said Maev, "when it is not necessary at all. *What!* A man in Connacht, so famous for its heroes, is so weak-witted that he must starve? Hang him or burn him would be my decision if I were King."

"Very well, darling," said Ailill. "Let the man be hung."

**M**AINE mo Epert said, "This is a pair from a distant island called America—the mac Shea and his wife, Belphebe. They wish to pay their respects."

"Let him speak," said Maev.

Shea wondered whether he ought to make an obeisance, but as no one else seemed to be do-

ing it, he merely stepped forward and said, "Queen, you have become so famous that even in America we have heard of you, and we could not restrain the desire to see you. Also, I would like to see your famous druid, Ollgaeth, since my wife is suffering from a most unpleasant geas, and I am told he is an expert at removing them. Also, I have a message for you and the King, but that had better be given in private."

Maev rested her chin on her hand and surveyed him. "Handsome man," she said, "it is easy to see that you are not much used to deceiving people. Your embroidery is in the style of Ulster, and now you will be telling me at once what this message is and from whom it comes there."

"It doesn't come from there," said Shea. "It's true I have been in Ulster, at Cúchulainn's house of Muirthemne. And the message is that your plan against him will bring disaster."

King Ailill's fingers stopped their restless twitching and his mouth came open, while Maev's eyebrows formed a straight line. She said in a high voice, "And who told you of the plans of the King of Connacht?"

*Look out,* Shea thought. *This is thin ice.* Aloud he said, "Why, it's just that in my own country, I'm something of a magician, and I learned of it through spells."

The tension appeared to relax. "Magic," said Maev. "Handsome man, you have said a true word, that this message should be private. We will hear more of it later. You will be at our table tonight, and there you will meet Ollgaeth. For the now, our son, Maine Mingor, will show you to a place."

She waved her hand and Maine Mingor, a somewhat younger edition of Maine mo Epert, stepped out of the group and beckoned them to follow him. At the door, Belphebe giggled and said, "Handsome man."

Shea said, "Listen . . ."

"That I did," said Belphebe, "and heard her say that the message should be private. You're going to need a gas as much as I tonight."

The setting sun was shooting beams of gold and crimson through the low clouds. The horses had been tied to rings in the wall of the building, and Pete was waiting, with an expression of boredom. As Shea turned to follow Maine Mingor, he bumped into a tall, dark man, who was apparently waiting for just that purpose.

"Is it a friend of Cúchulainn of Muirthemne you are now?" asked this individual ominously.

"I've met him, but we're not intimates," said Shea. "Have you any special reason for asking?"

"I have that. He killed my father

in his own house, he did. And I am thinking it is time he had one friend the less." His hand went to his hilt.

Maine Mingor said, "You will be leaving off with that, Lughaid. These people are messengers and under the protection of the Queen, my mother, so that if you touch them it will be both gods and men you must deal with."

"We will talk of this later," said Lughaid, and turned back to the palace.

Belphebe said, "I like that not."

Shea said, "Darling, I still know how to fence, and they don't."

## VI

DINNER followed a pattern only slightly different from that at Muirthemne, with Maev and Ailill sitting on a dais facing each other across a small table. Shea and Belphebe were not given places as lofty as at Cúchulainn's board, but in partial compensation they had the two druids just opposite.

It became clear at once that Ollgaeth, a big stoutish man with a mass of white hair and beard, was one who asked a question only to trigger himself off on remarks of his own. He inquired about Shea's previous magical experience, and let him just barely touch on the illusions he had encountered in the Finnish Kalevala before taking off.

"Ah, now you would be thinking that was a great rare thing to see, would you not?" he said and gulped at barley beer. "Now let me tell you that of all the places in the world, Connacht produces the greatest illusions and the most beautiful. I remember, I do, the time when I was making a spell for Laerdach, for a better yield from his dun cow, and while I was in the middle of it, who should come by but his daughter, and she so beautiful that I stopped my chanting to look at her.

"Would you believe it now? The milk began to flow in a stream that would have drowned a man on horseback, and I had barely time to reverse the spell before it changed from illusion to reality and ravaged half a country."

Cathbadh nodded. Shea said, "Oh, I see. The chanting—"

Ollgaeth hurried on. "And there is a hill behind the rath of Maev this very moment. It looks no different from any other, but a hill of great magic, being one of the hills of the Sidhe and a gateway to their kingdom."

"Who—" began Shea, but the druid only raised his voice a little. "Mostly now, they would be keeping the gateways closed. But on a night like tonight, a good druid or even an ordinary one might open the gate."

"Why tonight?" asked Belphebe.

"What other night would it be but the Lúchnasaedh? Was it not for that you would be coming here? No, I forget. Forgive an old man." He smote his forehead to indicate the extent of his fault. "My dear friend, Cathbadh, would be just after telling me you came to discuss matters of high magic and a troublesome geas that lies on your lady. Wella, well ah. You have come to the right place."

Cathbadh said, "Still, he should not lose the sight of the hill of the Sidhe, for that will be a sight to take to his home in America with him."

"And it is myself will show it to him the night," said Ollgaeth. He turned to Cathbadh. "You will be coming with us, dear? And perhaps the mac Shea will be showing us some of his American magic when we come there, as I understand he is a rare good man with a spell."

Whatever reply Shea had in mind was cut off by King Ailill rapping on his table with the hilt of his knife and saying in his high voice, "We will now be hearing from Ferchertne, the bard, since this is the day of Lúgh, and a festival."

SERFS were whisking away the last of the food and benches were being moved to enlarge the space around Ferchertne, a youngish man with long hair and a lu-

gubrious expression, who sat down on a stool with his harp, plucked a few melancholy twangs from the strings and in a bumpish baritone launched into the epic of the Fate of the Children of Tuirenn.

It wasn't very interesting and the voice was definitely bad. Shea glanced around and saw Brodsky fidgeting every time the harpist missed a quantity or struck a false note. Everyone else seemed to be affected almost to the point of tears, however, even Ollgaeth. Finally Ferchertne's voice went up in an atrocious discord and there was a violent snort from Pete.

The harp gave a twang and halted abruptly. Shea followed every eye in the room to the detective, who stared back belligerently.

"You would not be liking the music now, dear?" said Maev in a glacial voice.

"No, I wouldn't," said Brodsky. "If I couldn't do better than that with somebody holding my nose, I'd turn myself in."

"Better than that you shall do," said Maev. "Come forward, ugly man. Eiradh, you are to stand by this man with your sword, and if I signal you that he is less than the best, you are to bring me his head at once."

"Hcy!" cried Shea, and Brodsky, "But I don't know the words."

Protest was useless. He was grabbed by half a dozen pairs of

hands and pushed forward beside the bard's seat. Eiradh, a tall, bearded man, pulled out his sword and stood behind the pair, a smile of pleased anticipation on his face.

Brodsky looked around and then turned to the bard. "Give a guy a break, will you?" he said. "Go back over that last part till I catch the tune."

Ferchertne strummed obediently, while Brodsky leaned close, humming until he got the rather simple air that carried the words of the ballad. Then he straightened up, gesturing with one hand toward the harpist, who struck a chord and began to sing:

"Take these heads unto thy breast, O Brian . . ."

Pete Brodsky's voice soared over his, strong and confident, with no definite syllables, but carrying the tune for Ferchertne's words as the harp itself never had. Shea, watching Queen Maev, saw her stiffen, and then, as the melancholy ballad rolled on, two big tears came out on her cheek. Ailill was crying, too, and some of the audience were openly sobbing. It was like a collective soap-opera binge.

The epic came to an end at last, with Pete holding the high note after the harp had stopped. King Ailill lifted an arm and dried his streaming eyes on his sleeve, while Maev dried hers on her handkerchief. She said, "You have done more than you promised,

American serf. I have not enjoyed the Fate of the Children more in my memory. Give him a new tunic and a gold ring." She stood up. "And now, handsome man, we will be hearing your message. You will attend me while the others dance."

AS a pair of bagpipers stepped forward and gave a few preliminary howls on their instruments, Maev led the way through a door at the back, down the hall to a bedroom sumptuous by the standards that obtained here. There were rushlights against the wall and a soldier on guard at the door.

Maev said, "*Indech!* Poke up the fire, for it is cool the air is."

The soldier jabbed the fire with a poker, leaned his spear against the door and went out. Maev seemed in no hurry to come to business. She moved about the room restlessly.

"This," she said, "is the skull that belonged to Feradach mac Conchobra. I had him killed in payment for the taking of my dear Maine Morgor. See, I have had the eyeholes gilded."

Her dress, which had been a bright red in the stronger illumination of the hall, was a deep crimson here, and clung closely to a figure that, while full, was unquestionably well shaped.

"Would you be having a drop

of Spanish wine now?" she said.

Shea felt a little trickle of perspiration gather on his chest and run down, and wished he were back with Ollgaeth. The druid was verbose and hopelessly vain, but he had furnished the tipoff on that chanting. It was some kind of quantity control for the spells that went with it. "Thanks," he said.

Maev poured wine into a golden cup for him, poured more for herself, and sat down on a stool. "Draw close beside me," she said, "for it is not right that we should be too much overheard. There. Now what is this of planning and disasters?"

Shea said, "In my own country I am something of a magician, or druid as you call it. Through this I have learned that you're going to get all Cúchulainn's enemies together, then put a geas on him to make him fight them all at once."

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "You know too much, handsome man," she said, and there was a note of menace in her voice. "And the disasters?"

"Only that you had better not. The future of this is that you will succeed against Cúchulainn, but it will end up in a war in which you and your husband and most of your sons will be killed."

SHE sipped her wine, then stood up suddenly and began to pace the floor, moving like a crimson

tide. Shea thought etiquette probably required him to get up, too, and he did so.

Not looking at him, Maev said, "And you have been at Muirthemne . . . and brought Cathbadh, the druid, with you here . . . and you know magical spells . . . Ha!"

She whirled with sudden pantherlike grace and faced Shea. "Tell me, handsome man, is it not true that you two came here to work on us with spells and magic and put a geas on us to defeat our purpose? Is it not true now that this tale of wars and disasters is something made up out of nothing?"

Shea said, "No, it isn't. I beat Cathbadh in a contest, and have reason to believe that he not only doesn't like me, but is cooking up something against me. And—"

She stamped. "Do not be lying to me. You have come here with your foreign magic to put a geas on Ollgaeth, and maybe on ourselves, that we are to do your saying."

**T**HIS was getting dangerous. Shea said, "Honest, I wouldn't put a geas on you. I don't know how."

"I do not care in the least at all," she said, "but you shall never make me do your bidding." She turned and stepped across the room, opened a big jewel case,

from which she took a gold bracelet. "Come hither."

Shea stepped over to her. She rolled up his sleeves and snapped the bracelet on his arm, standing very close.

"Thanks," said Shea, "but I don't think I ought to accept—"

"And who are you to be saying what you will accept from Queen Maev? But touching the other, it is a thing decided, and I will go through with my project against Cúchulainn, no matter if it costs me my life and all. Come now."

She filled the wine cups again, took his hand, guided him to the stools and sat down close beside him. "Since life will be so brief, we may as well have what we can out of it," she said, drank off the cup and leaned back against Shea.

The thought leaped across his mind that, if he moved aside and let this imperious and rather beautiful woman slip to the floor, she would probably have his head taken off. He put an arm around her in self-defense. She caught the hand and guided it to her bosom, then reached for the other hand and led it to her belt. "The fastening is there," she said.

The door opened and Maine mo Eper came in, followed by Belphebe.

"Mother and Queen—" began the young man, and stopped.

To give Maev due credit she got to her feet with dignity and

without apparent embarrassment. "Will you be forever behaving as though you were just hatched from the shell now?" she demanded.

"But I have a case against this woman. She made a promise to me, she did, and she has a geas on her that makes a man as ill as though bathed in venom."

"You will be having Ollgaeth take it off, then," said Maev.

"'Tis the night of Lúgh. Ollgaeth is not to be found."

"Then you must even bed by yourself, then," said Maev. She looked from Shea to Belphebe and her expression was rather sour.

"I think we had better be going along, too, Harold," said Belphebe, sweetly.

## VII

WHEN they were outside Belphebe said, "Tell me not—I know. She looked so fine in that red robe that you wished to help her take it off."

Shea said, "Honest, Belphebe, I—"

"Oh, spare me your complaints. I'm not the first wife to have a husband made of glass, nor will I be the last. What is it that you have on your arm?"

"Listen, Belphebe, if you'll only let me tell you . . ."

A form stepped out of the shadows into moonlight, which re-

vealed it as Ollgaeth. "The hour is met if you would see the hill of the Sidhe, mac Shea," he said.

She said, "Where's Cathbadh?"

"For bed, I think. He grew weary with his journey."

Shea turned to Belphebe. "Want to come along, kid?"

"Not I," she said and stifled an imaginary yawn. "I, too, am weary with the journey. Good night."

She took a couple of steps away. Shea stepped after her and bent his head close to hers. "Listen," he said, "you'd better come. Cathbadh was awfully anxious to have me go on this trip, and now he's cut himself out of the deal. I'm afraid he's cooking up something for you."

Belphebe shrugged off his hand. "I'm for bed," she said. "And with my geas to protect me."

He hated to leave her alone in her present mood, no matter how unjustified it was, but if he wanted to get any cooperation out of this vain druid, the man would have to be buttered up.

"All right," he said. "See you later, dear."

He turned to follow Ollgaeth through the dark streets. The guards at the gate were awake, a tribute to Maev's management, but they passed the druid and his companion readily enough.

Ollgaeth, stumbling along the track, said, "The Sidhe, now, they have the four great treasures of



Ireland—Dagda's cauldron, that will never let a man go foodless, the stone of Fál, that strikes every man it is aimed at, Lúgh's spear and Nuada's great manslaying sword, that is death to all before it, but protection to the bearer."

"Indeed," said Shea. "At the table you were saying—"

"Will you never let a man finish his tale?" said Ollgaeth. "The way of it is this—the Sidhe themselves may not use the treasures, for there is a geas on them that they can be handled only by a man of Milesian blood. Nor will they give them up, for fear the treasures may be used against them. And all who come into their land, they use hardly."

"I should think—" began Shea.

"I do call to mind there was a man named Goll tried it," said Ollgaeth. "But the Sidhe cut off both his ears and fed them to the pigs, and he was never the same man after. Ah, it's a queer race they are, and a good man one must be to sit at table with them."

**T**HE Hill of the Sidhe loomed in front of them.

"If you will look carefully, mac Shea," said Ollgaeth, "to the left of that little tree, you will see a darkish patch in the rocks. Let us move closer now." They climbed the base of the hill. "Now if you will be standing about here, watch the reflection of the moon on the

spot there. Watch carefully."

Shea looked, moving his head from side to side—and made out a kind of reflection on the surface of the rock, not as definite and clear as it might be, more like that on a pond, wavering slightly with ripples. Clearly an area of high magical tension.

Ollgaeth said, "It is not to everyone I would be showing this or even telling it, but you will be going back to your America and it is as well for you to know that, because of the spells the Sidhe themselves place on these gates, they may be opened in this hour without the use of the ancient tongue. Watch now." He raised his arms and began to chant:

"The chiefs of the voyage over  
the sea

By which the sons of Mil came  
. . ."

It was not very long, ending:

"Who opens the gateway to Tír  
na n-Og?

Who but I, Ollgaeth the druid?"

He clapped his hands together sharply. The wavering reflection faded and Shea saw nothing but blackness, as if he were looking into a tunnel in the side of the hill.

"Approach, approach," said Ollgaeth. "It is not like that the Sidhe will be dangerous against a

druid as powerful as myself."

Shea went nearer. Sure enough, he was looking down a tunnel that stretched some distance into blackness, with a faint light beyond. He put out his left hand—it went into the hole where solid rock had been without resistance, except for a slight tingly feeling.

As he turned the hand around, there was a low mumbling sound behind him and, at the same moment, something both clinging and resistant, like glue about to harden, gripped him from wrist to fingers. He half turned his head. Not three feet below on the slope in the moonlight stood Cathbadh, the druid, arms aloft and chanting in a low voice. Behind him was Ollgaeth.

"*You bastard!*" yelled Shea, but the chant went on and the tension was increasing. There wasn't going to be much time.

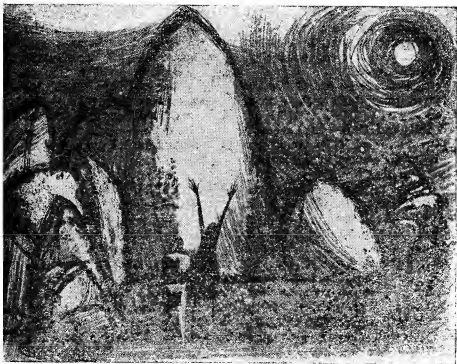
**S**UDDENLY, Shea remembered that cold iron was a prescriptive against most kinds of magic. He reached across his body, whipped out the broadsword and, with difficulty because he had to shorten his arm, made a slashing cut around the head, at the same time jerking mightily. It gave with a *plop*—and he went tumbling backward down the slope, cannoning into the chanting druid and sending the two of them sprawling in a tangle of legs and arms.



Shea rolled over once more, and jackknifed to his feet, his blade still pointed at Cathbadh, who climbed to his feet more slowly. He seemed to have something wrong with one arm.

Ollgaeth said, "Cathbadh, dear, I would be telling you now, that it's a bad day when you tamper with foreign druids, and now maybe you will be believing me. I remember—"

Shea said, "Shut up or it will be a worse night. I want to get



to the bottom of this and find out some good reason why I shouldn't stick you both with this thing right now. You were in it together, weren't you?"

Ollgaeth said, "It was only to keep you there the while you told us some of the magic of the Americans. I have a geas on me that I cannot chant against anyone who has not harmed me or the Queen."

"Yet you didn't mind helping this lug trap a stranger who had

done nothing to you. Stand still, you." He waved the point menacingly at Cathbadh, who showed signs of moving. "If you start another one of those chants, I'll let you have it."

"You need not be afraid at all, at all," said Ollgaeth. "Will you not be seeing he has hurt his arm and cannot lift it to raise a spell?"

"That's good," said Shea. "Now look here, Ollgaeth. You didn't actually throw any spells at me,

so it won't hurt your geas, but you did get me out here where Cathbadh was going to lock me up, so you owe me something. Isn't that right?"

"It is not to be denied that the Queen might take such a view. But . . ."

Shea said, "All right, I'm ready to make a deal. Is this really the gate to the country of the Sidhe?"

"It is that."

"Then you're going to teach me how to use the spell on it. It might come in handy. And then we're going to tie dear Cathbadh up, where he won't make any more mischief for the night. And then we're going back to Cruachain, and you're going to take that geas off my wife. I'll call it square and say nothing to Maev, and even teach you some new magic in the morning. Agreed?"

He was thinking fast. If Ollgaeth showed good faith by taking off Belphebe's geas that night and teaching him to open the gate of the Sidhe—and if it *was* a gate of the Sidhe—Pete could be collected in the morning and a swap be made for getting the three of them back to Ohio.

As for Cathbadh, a night under dew wouldn't hurt him, after what he tried to pull. And if Ollgaeth didn't work out right, it should be possible to retrieve Cathbadh in the morning and compel him by one process or another to take

them to a druid who could both remove the geas and teach him enough to get back home.

Ollgaeth said, "I am thinking that this is as good a way to solve things as I have heard." He moved forward and, although the Ultonian druid looked malevolent even in the moonlight, began to tear strips from his outer robe to tie him up.

**O**LLGAETH, for a wonder, didn't say anything as they walked back, apparently sunk in deep purple thoughts. At the gate, the guard said to the druid, "It is herself wishes to see you and will be waiting wake," and Ollgaeth excused himself, saying he would be around later to deal with the geas if Shea were still awake. Shea said he would be, and tapped at the guest-house door.

"Who comes?" said Belphebe's voice.

"It's me—Harold."

The bolt clicked back, and the door opened to show her fully dressed, a line of worry in her forehead.

"My lord," she said, "I do pray your pardon for my angers. I see now 'twas no more your fault at Muirthemne. But we must be quick."

"What do you mean?"

She had their small items of gear all ready. "Pete was here but now. We are in deadly danger,

among the Queen, Maine mo Epert and this Lughaid who accosted you. For your refusal to her, they have her permission to take our heads if they will."

Shea put his hand on his sword. "I'd like to see them try it."

"Foolish man! It is not the one or two, but a band—six, half a score. Comc." She pulled him toward the door.

"But where's Pete?" he protested. "We can't go back without him. And I've made a deal with Ollgaeth."

"Nor can we go back at all if we do not live out the night," she said, leading him out into the dark, silent street. "Pete is doing what he may to gain us time. His singing's wholly caught them. All else yields before present necessity."

At the gate there was now only one guard, but he held his spear crosswise and said, "I cannot be letting you out the night. The Queen has sent word."

Belphebe gave a little cry. Shea half turned to see sparks of light dancing, back among the houses. Torches—and doubtless Ollgaeth the druid had been reached by Maev and would have some sort of geas to put on them if he came in sight. He swung around again, unsheathing his sword, and, without warning, drove a thrust at the guard's neck. The soldier jerked up his buckler just in time to catch

Shea's point in the edge of the bronze decorations. Then he lowered his spear and drew it back for a jab.

Shea recovered, knocking the spear aside with his edge, but was unable to get around the shield for a return lunge. He thrust twice, feinting with the intention of driving home into an opening, but each time a slight movement of the buckler showed it would be futile. The soldier balanced, drew back for another thrust, then swore as Belphebe, who had slipped past him, caught the butt end of his weapon.

He shouted, "*Ho! An alarm!*"

They had to work fast. Shea aimed a cut at the man's head, but he ducked, simultaneously releasing the spear into Belphebe's hands, who went tumbling backward as the man did a quick sidestep and whipped out his sword.

Shea made a lightning estimate. The guard's face and neck were too small a target and too well protected by the shield, his torso doubly protected by shield and mail. Down.

He made a quick upward sweep that brought the buckler aloft, then drove the blade into the man's thigh, just above the knee and below the edge of the kilt. He felt the blade cleave meat—the man's leg buckled, spilling him to the ground in a clang of metal with a groaning shout.

Behind them in the rath, there were answering cries and the torchlight points turned. "*Come on!*" cried Belphebe, and began to run. She still clutched the big spear, but was so light on her feet it did not appear to matter. Shea, trying to keep up with his wife, heard more shouts behind them.

"The hill," he gasped and, as he ran, was suddenly glad the Irish of this period were not much good with bows.

**H**E was getting short of breath, though Belphebe was running as lightly as ever. The hill loomed over them, dark now by reason of the movement of the moon. "This way," gasped Shea, and ran up the uneven slope. There was the black rock, still shining, queerly mirrorlike. Shea lifted his arms over his head and began to chant, panting for breath:

"The chiefs of the voyage—over the sea—

By which—the sons of Mil came—"

Behind, one of the pursuers set up a view-halloo. Out of the corner of an eye, Shea saw Belphebe whirl and balance the spear as though for throwing, but he didn't have time to stop and tell her that such a weapon couldn't be used that way.

"Who but I, Harold mac Shea?"

he finished, resoundingly. "Come on!"

He dragged Belphebe toward the dimly-seen black opening, and through. When he entered the darkness he felt a tingling all over, as of a mild electric shock.

Then, abruptly, sunlight replaced moonlight. He and Belphebe were standing on the downward slope of another hill, like the one they had just entered. He had just time to take in the fact that the landscape was similar to the one they had quitted, before something crashed down on the back of his head and knocked him unconscious.

## VIII

**B**RIUN mac Smetra, King of the Sidhe of Connacht, leaned forward in his carven chair and looked at the prisoners. Harold Shea looked back at him as calmly as he could, although his hands were bound behind his back and his head was splitting.

Briun was a tall, slender person with pale blond hair and blue eyes that seemed too big for his face. The others were a delicate-looking people, clad with Hellenic simplicity in wrap-around tunics.

"It will do you no good at all to be going on like this," said the King. "So now it is nothing at all you must lose but your heads, for the Connachta you are."

"But we're not Connachta," said Shea. "As I told you . . ."

A husky man with black hair said, "They look like Gaels, they speak like Gaels and they are dressed like Gaels."

"And who should know better than Nera, the champion, who was a Gael himself before he became one of us?" said the King.

"Now look here, King," said Shea. "We can prove we're not Gaels by teaching you things no Gael ever knew."

"Can you now?" said Briun. "And what sort of things would those be?"

Shea said, "I think I can show your druids some new things about magic."

Beside him, Belphebe's clear voice seconded him. "I can show you how to make a bow that will shoot—two hundred yards."

Briun said, "Now it is to be seen that you are full of foolish lies. It is well known that we already have the best druids in the world, and no bow will shoot that far. This, now, is just an excuse to have us feed you for a time until it is proved you are lying, which is something we can see without any proof being needed. You are to lose your heads."

He made a gesture of dismissal and started to rise.

The black-thatched Nera said, "Let me—"

"Wait a minute!" cried Shea

desperately. "This guy is a champion, isn't he? All right, how about it if I challenge him?"

The King sat down again and considered. "Since you are to lose your head anyway," he said, "we may as well have some enjoyment out of it. But you are without armor."

"Never use the stuff," said Shea. "Besides, if neither one of us has any, things will move faster." He heard Belphebe gasp beside him, but did not turn his head.

"Ha, ha!" said Nera. "Let him loose and I will be making him into pieces of fringe for your robe."

Somebody released Shea and he stretched his arms and flexed his muscles to restore circulation. He was pushed rather roughly toward the door, where the Tuatha Dé Danaan were forming a ring, and a sword was thrust into his hand. It was one of the usual Irish blades, almost pointless and suitable mainly for cutting.

"Hey!" he said. "I want my own sword, the one I had with me."

Briun stared at him a moment out of pale, suspicious eyes. "Bring the sword," he said, and then called, "*Miach!*"

THE broadsword that Shea had ground down to as fine a point as possible was produced and a tall old man stepped forward.

"You are to be telling me if there is a geas on this blade," said the King.

The druid took the blade and, holding it flat on both palms, ran his nose along it, sniffing. He looked up. "I do not find any smell of geas or magic about it," he said, then lifted his nose like a hound toward Shea. "But about this one there is certainly something that touches my profession."

"It will not save him," said Nera. "Come and be killed, Gael." He swung up his sword.

Shea just barely parried the downstroke. The man was strong as a horse and had a good deal of skill in the use of his clumsy weapon. For several panting minutes, the weapons clashed. Shea had to step back, and back again, and there were appreciative murmurs from the spectators.

Finally, Nera, showing a certain shortness of breath and visibly growing restive, shouted, "You juggling Greek!" He took a step backward and wound up for a two-handed overhead cut, intended to beat down his opponent's blade by sheer power. Instantly, Shea executed the maneuver known as an advance-thrust — dangerous against a fencer, but hardly a barbarian like this. He hopped forward, right foot first and shot his arm out straight. The point went right into Nera's chest.

Shea's intention was to jerk his

blade loose with a twist to one side to avoid the downcoming slash. But the point stuck between his enemy's ribs and, in the instant it failed to yield, Nera's blade, weakened and wavering, came down on Shea's left shoulder. He felt the sting of steel and, in the same moment, the sword came loose as Nera folded up wordlessly.

"You're *hurt!*" cried Belphebe. "Let me loose!"

"Just a flesh wound," said Shea. "Do I win, King Briun?"

"Loose the woman," said the King, and tugged at his beard. "Indeed, and you do. A great liar you may be, but you are also a hero and champion, and it is our rule that you take Nera's place. You will be wanting his head for the pillars of the house you will have."

"Listen, King," said Shea. "I don't want to be a champion, and I'm not a liar. I can prove it. And I've got obligations. I really come from a land as far from the land of the Gaels as it is from Tír na n-Og, and if I don't get back there soon, I'm going to be in trouble."

"Miach!" called the King. "Is it the truth he is telling?"

The druid stepped forward, said, "Fetch me a bowl of water," and when it was brought, instructed Shea to dip a finger in it. Then he made a few finger-passes, murmuring to himself, and looked up.



"It's of the opinion I am," he said, "that this mac Shea has obligations elsewhere and, if he fails to fulfill them, a most unfavorable geas would come upon him."

"We may as well be comfortable over a mug of beer in deciding these questions," said the King.

**B**ELPHEBE had been dabbing at Shea's shoulder. Now she caught his hand and they went in together. The big sword was awkward, and they had taken his scabbard as well, but he clung to it anyway.

When they were inside and King Briun had seated himself again, he said, "This is a hard case and requires thinking, but before we give judgment, we must know what there is to know. Now, what is this of a new magic?"

"It's called sympathetic magic," said Shea. "I can show Miach how to do it, but I don't know the old tongue, so he'll have to help me. You see—I've been trying to get back to my own place, and I can't do it because of that."

He went on to explain about the court of Maeu and Ailill, and the necessity of rescuing Pete and getting back with him. "Now," he said, "if someone will give me a little clay or wax, I'll show you how sympathetic magic is done."

Miach came forward and looked on with interest as someone brought a handful of damp clay to

Shea, who placed it on a piece of wood and formed it into a rather crude and shapeless likeness of the seated King. "I'm going to do a spell to make him rise," said Shea, "and I'm afraid the effect will be too heavy if you don't chant. So when I start moving my hands, you sing."

"It shall be done," said Miach.

A verse of two of Shelley ought to make a good rising spell. Shea went over it in his head, then bent down and took hold of the piece of wood with one hand, while he murmured, "Arise, arise, arise," and with the other began to make the passes. He lifted the piece of wood. Miach's chant rose.

So did a shriek from the audience. Simultaneously, an intolerable weight developed on Shea's arm, a crack zigzagged across the floor and he half turned his head in time to see the royal palace and all its contents going up like an elevator, already past the lower branches of the trees, with one of the spectators clinging desperately to the doorsill by his fingertips.

Shea stopped his passes and hastily began repeating the poem backward, lowering his piece of wood. The palace came down with a jar that sent things tumbling from the walls and piled the court in a yelling heap. Miach looked dazed.

"I'm sorry," said Shea, "I . . ."

Patting his crown back into position, King Briun said sternly,

"Is it ruining us you would be?"

Miach said, "O King, it is my opinion that this mac Shea has done no more than was asked, and that this is a very beautiful and powerful magic, and would be precious to the Sidhe."

"And you could remove the geas that lies on this woman and return the pair to their own place?"

Miach frowned. "The geas, yes —given only that it be removed in the place where it was laid. For the rest, I smell an inimical influence of a druid of the Gaels, and where he is present I cannot contend."

Shea said, "Look, you give it the old college try. I'll manage to keep Cathbadh off somehow. That's his name."

**T**HEN hear our judgment."

King Briun stretched forth a hand. "Now, mac Shea has killed our champion, and does not wish to take his place. There must be a balance against this, and we set it that it shall be this wonder-working bow of his wife's, which, if it is as good as his magic, will surely shoot holes through the sides of the mountains."

He paused and Shea nodded. The man could be quite reasonable after all.

"Secondly," Briun went on, "there is the matter of removing his wife's geas. Against this, we will place the teaching of this

new magic to our druid. Now respecting the transfer of these two to their own country, it is our judgment that it should be paid for by having mac Shea undertake to remove us of the Sinech, since it is so troublesome a monster and he is so great a champion and magician."

"Just a minute," said Belphebe. "That doesn't help us find Pete or get him back and trouble will come on us if we don't. And we really ought to do something for Cúchulainn. Maev is going through with her plan against him."

"We would willingly help you in this matter, but you have no other prices to pay."

Miach said, "Yet there is a way to accomplish all they ask, save in the matter of the man Pete, in the finding of whom I have no power."

Briun said, "You will be telling us about it, then."

"Touching the Sinech," said Miach, "it is so great and dreadful a monster that even a champion like mac Shea will be hard put against it by his own strength alone. Therefore, let us loan him the treasure of Ireland, the invincible sword of Nuada, which is forbidden to us by its geas, but which he will be able to use without any trouble at all.

"Touching the geas, it will be needed that I accompany mac

Shea's wife to the place where it was imposed, in order to lift it. Therefore, let the loan of the sword continue, and mac Shea can in turn loan it to this hero Cúchulainn, who will make a mighty slaughter of the Connachta we detest. Then, as I will be present, I can see that the blade is returned."

The King leaned his chin on one hand and frowned for a minute. Then he said, "It is our command that this be done as you advise."

## IX

**MIACH** was an apt pupil. At the third try, he succeeded in making a man he did not like break out in a series of beautiful yellow splotches. He was so delighted with the result that he promised Shea for the hunting of the Sinech not only the sword of Nuada but the enchanted shoes of Iubdan, that would enable him to walk on water.

He explained that the reason for the overcharge in Shea's magic was that the spells were in the wrong tongue, but as the magic wouldn't work at all without a spell of some kind and Shea didn't have time to learn another language, this was not much help.

About the Sinech itself, he was more encouraging. He did a series of divinations with bowls of water

and blackthorn twigs. Though Shea did not know enough of the magic of this continuum to make out anything but a confused and cloudy movement below the clear surface of the bowl, Miach assured him that he had acquired a geas that would not allow his release until he had accomplished something that would alter the pattern of the continuum itself.

"Now tell me, mac Shea," he said, "was it not so in the other lands you visited? For I see by my divinations that you have visited many."

Shea, thinking of how he had helped break up the chapter of magicians in Faerie and rescued his wife from the Saracens of the *Orlando Furioso*, was forced to agree.

"It is just as I am telling you, for sure," said Miach. "And I am thinking that this geas has been with you since the day you left home without your ever knowing it. We all of us have them, we do, and a good man it is that does not have trouble with his geasas."

Belphebe looked up from the arrow she was shaping. Her bow was a success, but finding seasoned material from which to build shafts was a problem. "Still, master druid," she said, "it is no less than a problem to us that we may return to our own place late, and without our friend Pete. For this would place us deeply in trouble."

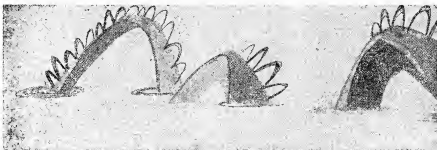
"Now I would not be worrying about that at all, at all," said Miach. "For the nature of a geas is that, once it is accomplished, it gives you no more trouble at all. And the time you are spending in the country of the Sidhe will be no more than a minute in the time of your own land, so that you need not be troubling till you are back among the Gaels."

"That's a break," said Shea. "Only I wish I could do something about Pete."

"Unless I can see him, my divination will not work on him at all," said Miach. "And now I am

sistency just strong enough to support him. A regular walking motion failed to yield good results. Shea found he had to skate along and he knew that, if he tripped over a wave, the result would be unfortunate, since the shoes would not keep the rest of him from breaking through the surface and, once submerged, would keep his head down.

NEXT morning, they went out in a procession to Loch Gara, the haunt of the monster, with King Briun, Belphebe and the assorted warriors of the Tuatha



thinking it is time for you to try the shoes."

They went to one of the smaller lakes, not haunted by Sinechs, and Shea stepped out cautiously from the shore. The shoes sank in a little, forming a meniscus around them, but they seemed to give the lake-water beneath a jellylike con-

Dé Danaan. The latter had spears, but they did not look as though they would be much help. Two or three of them fell out and sat under the trees to compose poems and the rest were a dreamy-eyed lot.

Miach murmured a druid spell, unwrapped the sword of Nuada and handed it to Shea. It was



better balanced than his own broadsword, coming down to a beautiful laurel-leaf point. As Shea swung it appreciatively, the blade began to ripple with light, as though there were some source of it within the steel itself.

He looked around. "Look, King," he said, "I'm going to try to do this right. If you'll cut down that small tree there, then hitch a rope to the top of that other tree beside it, then we'll bend down the second tree . . ."

Under his directions, the Tuatha did away with one tree and bent the other down by a rope running to the stump of the first. This rope continued on, Shea holding the rest of it in a coil.

"Ready?" he called.

"We are that," said King Briun, and Belphebe took up her shooting stance, with a row of arrows in the ground beside her.

Shea skated well out onto the lake, paying out the rope which dragged in the water behind him. The monster seemed in no hurry to put in an appearance.

"Hey!" called Shea. "Where are you, Sinech? Come on out, Loeh Ness!"

As if in answer, the still surface of the lake broke like a shattered mirror some fifty yards away and, through the surface, there appeared something black and rubbery, which vanished and appeared again, much closer. The Sinech

was moving toward him at a speed which did credit to its muscles.

Shea gripped the rope with both hands and shouted, "*Let her go!*"

The little figures on shore moved around, and there was a tremendous tug on the rope. The men had untied the tackle, so that the bent tree sprang upright. The pull on the rope sent Shea skidding shoreward as though he were water-skiing behind a motorboat. An arrow went past him and then another.

Shea began to slow down, then picked up again as a squad of King Briun's soldiers took hold of the rope and ran inland with it as fast as they could. His theory was that the Sinech would ground itself and, in that condition, could be dispatched by a combination of himself, the soldiers' spears and Belphebe's arrows.

But the soldiers on the rope did not yank hard enough to take up all the slack before Shea slowed down almost to a stop. Still twenty yards from shore, he could see the sandy bottom below him.

Behind him, he heard the water boiling and swishing under the urge of the Sinech's progress. Shea risked a glance over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of a creature somewhat like a mosasaur, with dozens of flippers along its sides in a long row. Just behind the pointed, lizardlike head that reared

from the water a pair of arrows projected, and another had driven into its cheek-bone, evidently aimed for the eye.

The instant of looking back brought Shea's foot into contact with a boulder that lay with perhaps an inch projecting from the surface. Over it and down he went, head first into the water of the marge.

The Sinech's jaws snapped like a closing bank-vault door on empty air, while Shea's head drove down until his face ploughed into the sand of the bottom. His eyes open under the water, he could see nothing but clouds of sand stirred up by the monster's passage. The water swished around him as the Sinech came in contact with solid ground and threshed frantically in its efforts to make progress.

The shoes of Iubdan kept pulling Shea's feet up, but at last he bumped into the boulder he had stumbled over. His arms clawed its sides and his head came out of water with legs scrambling after.

**T**HE Sinech was still grounded, but not hopelessly so, and was making distinct progress toward Belphebe, who valiantly stood her ground, shooting arrow after arrow into the creature. The same glance told him that the spearmen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan had taken to their heels.

The monster, engrossed in Belphebe as its remaining opponent, threw back its head for a locomotive hiss, and Shea, skating toward it, saw her bend suddenly to seize up one of the abandoned spears in an attempt to distract it from him.

Tugging out the sword of Nuada, he aimed for the Sinech's neck, behind the head, where it lay half in and half out of water, the stiff mane standing up above Shea's head. As he drove toward the monster, the near eye spotted him and the head started to swivel back toward him.

In his rush, Shea drove the sword in up to the hilt, hoping for the big artery.

The Sinech writhed, throwing Shea back as it ejected the sword. There was a gush of blood, so dark it looked black. The creature threw back its head and emitted a kind of mournful, whistling roar of agony. Shea skated forward on his magical shoes for another thrust, almost stumbling over the neck. He reached down to grasp a bunch of mane in his left hand and climbed aboard, cutting and stabbing.

The Sinech threw back its head violently, to a height of thirty feet, it seemed. Shea's grip on the mane was broken, and he was thrown through the air. All he could think of was that he must hang onto the sword. He had hard-

ly formulated this thought before he struck the water with a terrific splash.

When he got his head out against the resistance of the shoes at the other end of his anatomy, the Sinech was creaming the water with aimless writhings, its long head low on the bank, and its eyes already glassy.

The sword of Nuada had lived up to its reputation for giving mortal wounds all right. Shea had to develop a kind of dog paddle to carry him into shallow water past the throes of the subsiding monster.

Belphebe waded out to help him to his feet, regardless of the wet. She put both arms around him and gave him a quick, ardent kiss, which instantly doubled him over with cramps. Behind her the Sidhe were trickling out of the woods, headed by King Briun looking dignified, and Miach looking both amazed and pleased.

Shea said, "There's your job. Do you think that lets me out from under that geas you say I've got?"

Miach shook his head. "I am thinking it will not. A rare fine change you have made in the land of the Sidhe, but it is to the land of men you belong, and there you must do what is to be done. So we will just be going along to see if you can avert the fate that hangs over this Cúchulainn."

## X

**S**HEA and Belphebe were bouncing along in a chariot on the route from the section of Tír na n-Og corresponding to Connacht as the other world equivalent of Muirthemne to Ulster. They had agreed with Miach, who was coming in another chariot, that it would be better to go that way than re-enter as they had come and possibly have to fight their way through hostile Connacht, even though he was wearing the invincible sword of Nuada.

The country seemed very similar to that from which they had just come, though the buildings were generally poorer, and there were fewer of them. Indeed, none at all were in sight when they stopped at a furze-covered hill with a rocky outcrop near its base.

Miach signaled his charioteer to draw up and said, "Here stands another of the portals. You are to draw off a little while I cast my spell, as this is not one of the holy days and a magic of great power is required."

From the chariot, Shea could see him tossing his arms aloft, and caught an occasional word of the chant, which was in the old language. A blackness which seemed to suck up all the light of the day appeared around the outcrop, considerably larger than the tunnel Shea himself had opened. The



charioteers got down to lead the horses, and they found themselves on the reverse slope, with Cúchulainn's stronghold of Muirthemne in the middle distance, smoke coming from its chimneys.

Shea said, "That's queer. I thought Cúchulainn was at Emain Macha with the King, but it looks as though he came back."

"By my thinking," said Belphebe, "he is most strangely set on having his own will and no other, so that not even the prophecy of death can drive him back."

Shea said, "I hope Cathbadh isn't with him. I'd hate to have to get into a hassel with him before that geas—" He was interrupted as a horseman suddenly burst from a clump of trees to the right, and went galloping across the rolling ground toward Cúchulainn's stronghold.

They went down a slope into a depression, where the fold of the ground and a screen of young trees on the opposite side hid the view of Muirthemne. As they climbed the slope, the charioteers reined in. At the same time, a line of men jumped out of cover, with spears and shields ready.

One of them advanced on the travelers. "Who might you be," he demanded truculently, "and for why are you here?"

Miach said, "I am a druid of the Sidhe and I am traveling with my friends to Muirthemne, to re-

move a geas that lies on one of them."

"You will not be doing that the day," said the man. "It is an order that no druids are to come nearer to Muirthemne than this line until himself has settled his differences with the Connachta."

"Woe's me!" said Miach, then turned toward Shea. "You will be seeing how your geas still rules. I am prevented from helping you at the one place where my help would be of avail."

"Be off with you now!" the man said and waved his spear.

**B**EHIND her hand, Belphebe said to Shea, "Is this not very unlike them?"

Shea said, "By George, you're right, sweetheart! That isn't Cúchulainn's psychology at all." He leaned toward the guard. "Hey, you, who gave the order and why?"

The man said, "I do not know by what right you are questioning me at all, but I will be telling you it was the Shamus."

An inspiration struck Shea. "You mean Pete, the American?" "Who else?"

"We're the other Americans that were here before. Get him for us, will you? We can straighten this out. Tell him Shea is here."

The man looked at him suspiciously, then at Miach. He consulted with one of his companions, who stuck his spear in the ground, laid

the shield beside it and trotted off toward Muirthemne.

Shea said, "How come Pete's giving orders around here?"

"Because it's the Shamus he is."

Shea said, "I recognize the title all right, but what I can't figure out is how Pete got away from Crua-chain and got here to acquire it."

He was saved from further speculation by the creaking of a rapidly driven chariot, which drew up on the other side of the hedge. From it descended a Pete Brodsky strangely metamorphosed into something like the Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's court. His disreputable trousers projected from beneath a brilliantly red tunic embroidered in gold, he had a kind of leather fillet around his head, a considerable growth of beard and, at his belt, swung not one, but two obviously homemade blackjacks.

"Jeez!" Brodsky said. "Am I glad to see *you*! It's all right, gang—let these guys through. They're part of my mob."

Shea made room for him to climb into their chariot and the spearmen fell back respectfully as Pete directed the driver through the winding gaps in the entanglement.

When they had cleared it, Shea said, "How did you get here, anyway?"

Pete said, "It was a pushover. They had me singing until I al-

most busted a gut. I tried to get this Ollgaeth to send me back to Ohio, but he nixed it and said I'd have to throw in with their mob when they came over here to rub out Cúchulainn. Well, hell, I know what's going to happen to the guys in that racket. They're going to end up with their heads looking for the rest of them.

"Anyway, I figured if you get anywhere after your fadeout, it will be here. So, one day when this Ollgaeth has me in the King's ice-house, showing me some of the flash, I figure it's a good chance to take along some presents. I let him have one on the conk, snatched everything I could carry and made a getaway."

"You mean you stole Ailil's crown jewels?" said Shea.

"Sure. I don't owe him nothing, do I? Well, when I get here with the ice, they roll out the carpet and send for this Cúchulainn. I give him a line about how this Maev mob is coming to hit him on the head, see? Only they're going to put a geas on all his gang so they'll go to sleep and can't do any fighting.

"That was different, see? They all want to get in on the cutting party, only they can't dope out what to do about it. I figure it's one of two things about these geasas. I been watching this Ollgaeth and the line I got is, if he can't get close enough, he can't

make this geas business stick."

"That's good magicology," said Shea. "So that's why you have guards out."

"Yeah," said Pete. "Now the other line is this. I dope it that, if you got one of these magic spielers around, he'll sort of pull the stuff in from another one, so when this Cathbadh wants to get into the act I run him out, see?"

SHEA heaved a sigh of relief. "That's good magicology, too, and I'm glad you did, because it's going to save us a lot of trouble. What I can't figure out is why you didn't get Cathbadh to send you home."

"Home?" said Pete. "What do you mean, home? When I come up with my line, they make me head Shamus of the force here; that's how I got to stash the combination around the place. Do you think I want to go back to Ohio and pound a beat?"

"Now, look here . . ." began Shea, but at that moment the gate of Muirthenne loomed over them, with Cúchulainn beside it, accompanied by a tall, beautiful woman who must be Emer.

The hero said, "It is glad to see you that I am, darlings. Your slave is less beautiful than ever, but you will be handselling him to me, for I think that with his help I may escape the doom that is predicted."

Shea climbed down and helped Belphebe out of the chariot. "Listen," he said. "Pete's already done all he can for you, and we don't dare go back to our own country without him."

Pete said, "Look, I'll write you a letter or something to put you in the clear. Leave a guy run his own racket, will you? This is my spot."

"Nothing doing," said Shea. "Any letter you write now would be in ancient Erse, and no more use than a third leg. Go ahead, Miach."

The druid lifted his arms, mumbled a phrase or two and lowered them again. "The geas is still upon you, mac Shea," he said. "And there is an odor of the magic of Cathbadh which I cannot overcome."

"Oh, I forgot," said Shea, and pulled the sword from his belt. "Here, Cúchulainn, this is the sword of Nuada which I borrowed from the Sidhe. You'll have to give it back to Miach here after you're through with the Connachta, but it will protect you better than Pete ever could. Does that make us square?"

"It does that," said Cúchulainn, holding the great sword up admiringly. Light rippled and flowed along the blade. "I will not be asking for your man now, at all."

"Now, Miach!" said Shea.

Miach raised his arms.

"Hey, I don't want—" began Pete as the chant rose.

*Whoosh!*

Shea, Belphebe and Brodsky arrived in the living room at Garamden, Ohio, with a rush of displaced air and almost in a heap. Behind them, the door of Shea's study stood open and, as the trio landed, a couple of heavy-set men with large feet turned startled faces. Their hands were full of Shea's papers.

Paying no attention to them, Shea gathered Belphebe in his arms and kissed her—experimentally at first and then ardently. The geas was gone, all right.

The heavy-set man gaped from them to Brodsky.

"By God," said one of them, "if it isn't Pete Brodsky, the syn-

thetic harp, all dressed up in a monkey suit! Wait till the boys at the precinct hear about this."

"And they're going to get an earful about the Auld Sod, the pack of head-hunters!" Brodsky retorted. "From now on, it's *Nazdrovie Polska!* That means 'Long live Poland!'" he explained politely to Belphebe, who was looking puzzled.

"Thank you," she managed to say before Shea pulled her back into his arms. "But you have shown that the geas has gone," she protested to Shea.

"That was the test," he said. "Now comes the enjoyment!"

*Fletcher Pratt*  
*L. Sprague de Camp*

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## PREDICTION

In the next issue of *BEYOND Fantasy Fiction*, Roy Hutchins introduces you to his *STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS*, a novelet about a youngster that should become as well known and loved as *Tam Sawyer* or *Huck Finn*, even though the boy in the story is a—well, a bay river. And why not? Some rivers are roughnecks, other are placid; it all depends on their age. This one is going through all the joys and torments of growing up, trying to get an education, learn a bit about the world. And the real trouble comes about when this kid of a river—still wet behind the ears, so to speak—won't stay in bed because he's grown too big for his bridges!

*AGE CANNOT WITHER* is both the name and the problem of Cleve Cartmill's worrisome, swift-paced novelet . . . for all the art of the makeup man can't add a wrinkle or gray a hair of the actress who has to fit the role of an old lady! She, you see, has signed a contract with a Demon Producer . . . and now the studio's legal department has to find a loophole somewhere!

*When a courtship needs the velvety touch, there's nothing like a magical sofa. But watch out for . . .*

# *The Upholstered Chaperone*

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

Illustrated by KOSSIN

"YOU just don't look right to me," said the sofa, a blue velour Louis Quatorze.

"Uh—what?" gasped Arnold.

The sofa kept smug silence. The

salesman, after a birdlike twitch, smiled tolerantly. "How clever of you, Mr. Arnold. I'd no idea you were a ventriloquist."

Neither had Arnold, but argu-



ing about it could get sticky. He intended to have the sofa, whether it liked him or not. It was to be his ultimate weapon in his long siege of Eileen Kilmer.

"Any rats in it?" Arnold asked, gingerly poking under it.

"Sir! Get your grimy paws off my midriff!"

Arnold leaped back at the sofa's outraged squeak. "Hah!" said the salesman with a pained grin. "Hah-hah! You and this sofa were made for each other, Mr. Arnold. Your friends will scream."

"I'll bet," Arnold said darkly. "Well, how much is it?"

The salesman named a figure that meant Arnold would be out selling insurance from dawning till dusk for a couple of months. Arnold gulped.

"Cheapskate!" sniffed the sofa. "When the Comte de Nuit had me made especially for his mistress, Madame Sinmart, he paid a pretty franc, let me tell you. No haggling. Ah, *noblesse!*"

Fighting back an urge to kick this upholstered budgetary disaster, Arnold paid.

THE freak was going to look silly in his leather-and-monks-cloth apartment, but it might entice Eileen through the doorsill, something which carefully plotted ballyhoo about quiet evenings over broiled porterhouse and choice l.p.r. selections had thus far been

unable to do, unfortunately.

Only the night before, while they were walking past the antique shop, Eileen had squeezed Arnold's arm in such rapture that Arnold, thinking his seductive persuasions had produced a delayed reaction, had quickly encircled her waist.

He had been preparing to plant a triumphant kiss on her lovely cheek when her breathless words left him high and dry as a stranded sea slug. "Look, Arnold! That *darling* sofa! Oh—what wouldn't I give to have it!"

"Yeah?"

Jarred that she could work up more enthusiasm over a sickly azure wreck than his own reasonably sound physique, Arnold stared down at her. She was small but delectable, with a triangular, high-cheekboned face, gray eyes and black hair swept briefly back from an impish widow's peak, just the right tang of strangeness to spice the slim, soft body below.

Whenever he looked at her for very long, he invariably got vague ideas which warred with his opinion that the wedding service should be concluded with, *And may God have mercy on your soul*. He glanced back at the sofa.

It might be just the way to break through defenses that he had gloomily decided could be broken only by bell, book and candle. Bemused, he had taken Eileen home, kissed her chastely

in token of larger joys to come and betaken himself to see if his earnings could bear the brunt of an upholstered piece of junk.

Now in the cruel light of day, Arnold shuddered away from his purchase. "Here's the address," he told the salesman hoarsely. "Have it delivered right away, please."

**F**IVE cups of hot coffee later, Arnold unhocked his long legs from the stool at the lunchroom counter. He told himself, for the dozenth time, that the salesman had thrown his voice in a clever effort to sell the sofa, had then pretended to believe Arnold had done it in an effort to make it more convincing.

Sofas can't do anything but creak. Arnold repeated this silently till it had the ring of truth, then went over to the phone booth. He dialed the doctor's office where Eileen worked as a receptionist and, when her voice smiled back at him, told her about the sofa. As much as he thought was discreet . . .

He didn't even suggest that she come over—just gave his news and waited.

"Arnold!" Eileen was thrilled. "I—oh, I didn't realize you appreciated it! You know, you just sort of glared at it last night. You've actually *bought* it?"

"Positively," Arnold sighed, think of his depleted funds.

"Well, that's *lovely*! I mean, the sofa is. When are you going to let me see it?"

*Easy, boy, don't let your fangs show.*

Arnold spoke through the sudden thickness in his throat. "Why not tonight? I'm going out of town for a few days tomorrow morning." His palms sweated, but he kept his tone light. "Maybe you could tell me how to take care of it—furniture polish and so on. It'd be a shame to ruin it with my ignorance."

"It certainly *would*!" Eileen took the hint right out of his mouth. "Don't you dare touch it, Arnold! I'll be up *right* after work—a little after five."

"Fine," crooned Arnold. "I'll make us some sandwiches."

Blithely, he went out to his car. He didn't even hold a grudge against the salesman for the voice-throwing trick. The sofa was doing its work.

Arnold got home in time to unlock the apartment for the delivery men. As he glanced from the Louis Quatorze nightmare to his shiny, comfortable brown leather couch, he flinched, and barely suppressed a sudden, sharp urge to tell the men it was all a mistake, that they had come to the wrong apartment. But his good money was already paid and, anyhow, what would Eileen think if she came and found no sofa?

Madame Sinmart's loquacious property was installed. Sadly Arnold watched his old, lumpy lounging wreck carried out. He seemed to hear, as he closed the door after the men, a callous giggle. He kept his back turned. The sound came again.

"Okay!" he yelled, whirling and striding over to the sofa. "Do you have a sound-box or something built in your moth-eaten, scroungy guts?"

"My entrails," observed the sofa, "have outlived yours."

It relapsed into complacent silence.

Arnold was too disgusted to be afraid. The thing couldn't move, apparently, but he kept a wary eye on its legs as he bent over and peered underneath. He wasn't surprised to find a perfectly normal, ordinary sofa-bottom. After all, a radio or records couldn't possibly enable the thing to talk sense. Besides, it spoke at long and unpredictable intervals.

**H**E was stuck with a talking sofa, that was all.

Clairvoyant, as well, maybe? For just then it said, almost kindly, "Actually, it's simple—during my long life, I've been intimately associated with many people. I've heard them talk till I learned to imitate the sounds by compressing air in and out of my springs. Most of my owners have been beautiful

women." The sofa sighed. "I have therefore acquired a feminine point of view and may I say, sympathies. Ah, the tears that have been wept on me!"

Good Lord, had he brought home a moralist? What if it persisted in yapping after Eileen came?

Getting down on one knee, Arnold leered. "I bet you could tell some good stories, Quatorze. How about that Madame Sinmart?"

"Damned!" intoned Quatorze. "She cut her throat. The Comte had married a convent-bred chit and even quit visiting my poor Madame, who was unfortunately too old to find a lover right off hand. She sat right here—" to Arnold's shocked gaze, the right end of the sofa humped itself—"and slit her throat. I had to be completely recovered." It added dolorously, "Of course, one never does recover from such a thing. I mean I just got new material."

"Uh—yes. Terrible."

Spent from this effort at gay fellowship, Arnold heaved himself up and fled to the kitchen. He had to think of something—but what?—to keep Quatorze from blathering Eileen right out of his apartment.

Shakily, Arnold opened a cabinet. A drink might help, he thought.

Thus braced, Arnold went back to the living room. He pulled up



a hassock. It didn't seem quite safe to sit on the sofa.

"Now look, Quatorze," Arnold said companionably, "I'm expecting my girl friend up this evening."

"Goody!" bubbled Quatorze. "I want a family. When's the wedding?" Arnold sprang up from the footstool.

"Now wait a minute! Eileen . . ."

"Oh. She's that kind of girl." Quatorze snorted. "*Well . . .*"

"Shut up! Eileen's a damn sight nicer than—than your acquaintances!" He lowered his voice. "I want it understood that you're to keep quiet while she's here. None of your creakings. Is that clear?"

Quatorze muttered a while. Then it said defiantly, "*No!* I'm not going to sit idly by while you cause more tragedy. At least Madame Sinmart was lofty in her affairs—not a low, scheming bourgeois."

Arnold clenched his fists. He ought to kick it to kindling—but no, he couldn't. Without Quatorze, he couldn't interest Eileen in a cozy evening at his apartment.

Then inspiration struck. If the sofa was such a reformed character, it wouldn't want Eileen beyond its surveillance.

Arnold shrugged, said, "I guess I'll have to entertain her in the bedroom if you won't behave."

Quatorze swallowed the bluff. It seemed to tilt back. "No—don't do that! I'll be quiet."

"You promise?" demanded Arnold. "Not a word, not a moan?"

"*Heartless!*" wailed the sofa. Arnold swung away. "Yes, yes!" cried Quatorze. "I promise."

Arnold nodded. "Fine. You'll like her. She's going to tell me how to take care of you." *You beat-up, blue holocaust.*

Walking out of the room, Arnold reflected it might be just as well to humor the sofa for a while. He liked Eileen too much to rush her and possibly ruin his chances. If Quatorze would keep quiet, the evening ought to be the first of many.

EILEEN rushed in on the crack of five o'clock, bearing a brown paper sack and a look of ecstasy. She brushed right past Arnold and fell to her beautifully rounded knees by Quatorze.

"I went to the library on my lunch hour and read up on the care of fine furniture. Then I stopped by an antique shop and the man told me what kind of polish to get. I bought some cheesecloth, too, just in case you didn't have any."

She was already uncapping a bottle of repulsively hued liquid, which she poured into a thick wad of the cheesecloth. This was not what Arnold had had in mind.

"Won't you have some sandwiches?" he asked. "Coffee, gin,

tea, whiskey, milk—anything? You must be starved."

Glancing up long enough to cast him a faraway smile, Eileen shook her head till a strand of black hair tumbled below her widow's peak. "Later, Arnold. Right now, *this* is more important." She gestured impatiently. "Move out of my light, will you, please?"

"I'll help," Arnold decided. If you can't whip 'em, join 'em. But as he knelt to pick up a cloth, Eileen said, "*Please*, Arnold! Just watch this time, and see how I do it."

A snort came from the sofa. Eileen glared at Arnold. "Why don't you go make coffee? You plainly don't appreciate the treasure you've got, snorting at me!"

There was danger in telling her Quatorze had done the snorting. Arnold, an outcast in his own home, straggled back to the kitchen.

He had a tray of sandwiches all made, and a flotilla of little dishes of nuts, gherkins and olives. He plugged in the coffee-maker and reflected that at least it couldn't take much longer to polish that sofa. Then he and Eileen could talk—though conversation might get pretty cramped with Quatorze within speaking distance. He waited . . . and waited . . .

Finally, Arnold had had enough. He marched into the living room. Eileen was curled up in a corner

of Quatorze, stroking the velour and sort of purring.

"Isn't it *lovely*?" she crooned. Arnold looked at her slim ankles. He got a funny, breathless feeling.

"You're more so . . ." A fizzling rumble came from Quatorze. Eileen jumped up, looking startled.

"Are you feeling all right, Arnold? You've been making odd sounds all evening."

Arnold tried to laugh. "I'm hungry," he managed weakly.

"Of course, you poor dear! I'm sorry you had to wait, but—well, I never saw such a *fascinating* piece of furniture."

*Me, either*, thought Arnold. He stood back from the door with a little bow. "You can admire the sofa later. Come in and smile at my sandwiches now."

SHE ate daintily but hurriedly. Once she looked around and said chidingly, "You really have a nice place, Arnold, but the curtains are impossible. If I had it, I'd . . ."

The opening attack of female assertiveness, the vibration of lurking wedding bells. "Have a cup of coffee," Arnold said hastily—and burned himself on the side of the percolator.

Eileen did the dishes while Arnold stacked some records, mostly soothing, lush instrumentals that would not interfere with any tender remarks he might think of. He

turned to Eileen as she shined the last cup.

"Would you like to dance?" he murmured, holding out his arms. Eileen's eyes sparkled. She seemed to read his mind, but with gentle derision, not terrified scorn. Whirling past him, she sank in a flutter of can-can petticoated skirts, settling in a corner of the sofa.

"It's much too crowded for dancing. Besides, this may be my one and only chance to sit on this sofa." She patted the blue velour in a way that made Arnold bristle with jealousy.

He strode over and planted his hands on his belt. "Eileen, I've always thought you were a—a clear-headed girl. I've respected your intellect. I . . ."

"Have you?" smiled Eileen. She stretched her arms gracefully above her head and yawned languorously. "Arnold, dear, a woman *has* to be extravagant about *something*. If it can't be human, it might as well be furniture."

"My mother was extravagant," said Arnold. "She griped at my old man till he got a divorce. Then she married two other poor devils, bang-bang—like that. Too bad she didn't have your passion for Louis Quatorze."

There was a bad taste in his mouth. Damn it, he was crazy about Eileen, but why couldn't she quit making those sarcastic cracks? A hand closed on his arm. Eileen

was physically minute, but *she* fairly swung him around, dropped his arm and stood there with *her* eyes blazing green fire.

"Arnold! I'm *sorry!* I'm sorry that I love you! Are you going to go around all your life saying, 'My mama was a bad, bad womar and she broke my little baby heart.' Or are you going to face it and say, 'Okay, that's how it was and I can't help remembering—and—and hurting. But what happens from here on in is what *I* do?'" She spun away as her voice broke. "Good-by, Arnold. I—I hope you'll have lots of fun with your sofa!"

He grabbed her as she was groping for the doorknob. He had had plenty for one evening. Who was she to call him a baby and a psycho case when he was simply a bedeviled man with a sofa that talked and a girl who cried?

"Listen!" He had her shoulders under his hands and she was warm and trembling. Her mouth was parted and she faced him in a sort of shocked consent. Arnold forgot whatever he had been going to say.

**T**HE kiss shook him up. Thor-  
oughly. Eileen clung to him and he had a confused feeling of desire and protectiveness that made it seem impossible ever to let her leave. He kissed her again. When he drew back, she stayed in his arms.

"Eileen . . ."

She stiffened suddenly. He stared down at the hurt on her face—she was gazing past him toward the sofa. Arnold turned.

Dread shot through him, even before he recognized the gaudy tube as a lipstick case. It lay cozily on the sofa. Arnold tightened his hands.

"Damn you, Quatorze!"

Eileen said coldly, "Is that the lady's name?"

"Oh, *Lord!*" groaned Arnold.

"Honey, I can explain. That sofa—it talks and—and . . ."

With a glance of incredulous scorn, Eileen opened the door. "For old time's sake, Arnold, I advise you to see a doctor or stop drinking. And even if your sofa did talk—objects speak louder than words."

She stalked out and banged the door behind her.

For a long time, Arnold surveyed the monster under his roof. Finally he crossed over, sat down on the rug and said in what he hoped was an objective, conversational tone, "Why? I just want to know *why?*"

The lipstick glittered evilly. Arnold grabbed it as if it might turn into a snake, rolled it in his hands, then hurled it into the wastebasket.

"*Why?*" he said again.

"Don't deny what you were thinking," Quatorze retorted huffily. "From long experience, I know the outcome of lovers' quarrels.

You had the poor child feeling sorry for you. Also, you're good-looking in a tousled sort of way. I had to do *something*."

"Gee, thanks," said Arnold bitterly.

"It was nothing," Quatorze said airily. "I have all kinds of interesting mementos in my springs and upholstery. That little number you threw away belonged to an exponent of a fine old New Orleans profession. She had to hock me."

"A pity she didn't burn you, you obnoxious flea-bitten—"

"*I,*" broke in Quatorze, "am a duenna."

"A duenna?" Arnold's jaw dropped. Then he rallied enough to add, "Sure you don't mean chaperone? I thought you were French."

He got up, ready to abandon the stupid argument, but Quatorze said pleasantly, "Oh, I belonged to a Spanish lady once and, naturally, I learned the language. Duenna has more of an air than chaperone, don't you think? That's what my senora called me."

"She, no doubt, drank poison," growled Arnold.

"No, she was the only one of my owners to marry. A sea captain, he was. He was home nine times in nine years and they had nine children. Charming family."

"I think your Madame Sinmart was wiser," said Arnold. "Also, if I had any children, I'm damned if

I'd expose them to your influence.  
Good night!"

ARNOLD was out of town the next three days on business. While he was extolling the advantages of insurance to family men, he caught himself thinking of Eileen. He was not cheered at the grim vision of her marrying a substantial bread-and-butter citizen, which was probably what she was preparing to do.

As for himself—Arnold shivered—he would spend his existence going home at night to Quatorze. He had too much dough sewed up in the wretched sofa to throw it out. On the fourth day, reluctantly, he parked his car in front of his place, went up to his apartment and unlocked the door, closed his eyes till he was inside and then looked toward the sofa.

Quatorze sat there, blatantly elegant amid the reproachful remnants of the pre-antique days. "Welcome!" it said. "I'm glad to see you didn't bring any baggage with you."

Something snapped in Arnold's brain. A red mist in front of him turned Quatorze a virulent purple.

"I'll *teach* you!" Arnold yelled. "Just wait!"

He stormed down to the astonished maid's quarters and came back with a vacuum sweeper and all the attachments. In plain view of Quatorze, he selected the wick-

edest-looking fixture, screwed it into the nozzle and plugged in the sweeper.

"Now," he gloated.

"Please!" Quatorze gurgled. "Stay! Hold thy hand! *Don't!*"

Arnold jeered. "A cleaning ought to benefit your filthy mind." He pushed the control and sent the vacuum gobbling along the blue velour.

Quatorze seemed to cringe. Then a rending hideous racket wailed from the depths of it. It howled louder and louder, pitching its shrieks higher than the buzz of the cleaner. Arnold kept on doggedly. He was going to put this meddling piece of furniture in its place. The ringing phone interrupted him.

Switching off the cleaner as Quatorze gasped into silence, Arnold felt momentary hope. Could it be Eileen? Not possibly, he told himself, but his heart was thumping as he picked up the phone.

"What are you doing up there, Mr. Arnold?" It was the apartment manager's voice. "Three women have called me in a panic. They say someone's yelling her head off in your place."

"I'm vacuuming my sofa," Arnold snapped. "Tell the old busybodies I pay my rent the same as they do."

He hung up and returned to the attack. The phone rang again and

he ignored it. Quatorze shrieked, sobbed and squealed, but Arnold didn't stop till the sofa's cries had subsided to weak whimperings.

"You are to be *seen*, not heard," Arnold commanded, folding his arms. "I'll rip your springs out if you give me any more trouble. Understand?"

QUATORZE moaned submission. Just then, before Arnold could exult, a loud hammering resounded from the door, along with sounds of nervous whisperings and shifting feet. Wondering what was going on, Arnold flung open the door.

A couple of women yipped and jumped back behind two sturdy policemen. The apartment manager held his ground, though he kept twining his hands together and his eyes darted around like a scared rat's.

"Where is she, Mr. Arnold? Have you killed her?"

"W-w-what?" gulped Arnold. "Are you crazy?"

The policemen stepped in and got on either side of him. "Keep cool, son," one advised. "Play ball and you'll get off easier. Where's the woman?"

"There *isn't* any woman!" Arnold sputtered. "I was just vacuuming my sofa."

"*Hah!*" scoffed a hatchet-faced woman. "The most sickening wailings you ever heard! Bet he's chop-

ped her up. Look in the chests and drawers."

She led the apartment manager, the other neighbors and one cop to the bedroom. Arnold turned to his guard. "The sofa talks," he said desperately. "It was yelling." The cop stared. Then he rubbed his big chin pityingly.

"Son, I guess either way we're going to have to lock you up. Seen any mermaids too, lately?"

"I tell you—" began Arnold, when the phone pealed.

"Talk to *that*," boomed the policeman. "You won't have one in your cell."

Arnold picked it up. He didn't recognize the voice at first till it gave the name of the antique shop where Arnold had bought Quatorze. "... chance to make a nice profit if you care to sell, Mr. Arnold. The customer's right here. Shall I bring him up? He'll meet your price."

Swiveling around, Arnold stared at Quatorze. The monster had got him in trouble up to his ears, had broken up his romance with Eileen—and this was his chance to get rid of it. And profitably.

But as he glared at the sofa, suddenly, crazily, he recalled how Eileen had cuddled there, how she had polished the wood and stroked the velour. She would never have anything to do with him, but he still couldn't sell the object she had loved.

"No, thanks," he told the salesman. "I'm used to it now."

He cradled the phone. The searchers were straggling back into the room, prying suspiciously. "He may have tossed her out a window," growled the cop. "We'll look careful later. Right now—come along, buddy."

Arnold didn't say anything. He started to move along with his captors when the door burst open and Eileen ran in. She halted, glanced in horrified shock from the police to Arnold, then came over and stood in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she asked the cops. They didn't say anything. She clenched her hands. "Arnold didn't do it, whatever you think! He—he's wonderful and sweet and—and I'm going to marry him!"

**N**O double-crossing wench would talk like that. Things fell into place in Arnold's whirling mind and he put his arms around her. "Eileen, honey—do you *mean* that? Would you marry me?"

"Lady," cut in one of the police, "you can't marry this guy! If he isn't a criminal, he's crazy, on account of he's saying this sofa can talk and scream and—"

"And why not?" Quatorze inquired.

They all jumped and whirled. The sofa emitted a horrible scream. It laughed, it sobbed, it ran the

gamut of sounds a female could make from birth till death. When it got through, Eileen was clinging to Arnold and his unasked visitors were sidling toward the door. "If you're still not convinced," said Quatorze, "come back any time."

Arnold understood. When he asked Eileen to marry him—that was when Quatorze had quit playing possum and sounded off. A very proper duenna. He felt a glow of positive affection for it. But a good deal more for the girl in his arms.

"Eileen, what made you come back? I thought . . ."

She smiled and he realized for the first time that she had been crying. "I was worried about you, Arnold. You said the sofa talked and I—I thought you were losing your mind. So I had to come back."

"Lucky for me," said Arnold. "Well, you won't get lonesome while I'm at work. Quatorze can always talk to you." He gathered her up and for the first time sat down on the sofa. It felt comfortably welcoming.

"As I was saying," murmured Quatorze, "my first owner, Madame Sinmart—"

"Duenna," said Arnold, "don't you ever know when to shut up?"

*Jeanne Williams*



*"Who is Silvia? What is she?"*

*Oh, no!*

*What is Silvia . . .*

*and who isn't she?*

# Upon

**S**ILVIA ran laughing through the night brightness, between the roses and cosmos and Shasta daisies, down the gravel paths and beyond the heaps of sweet-tasting grass swept from the lawns. Stars, caught in pools of water, glittered everywhere, as she brushed through them to the slope

beyond the brick wall. Cedars supported the sky and ignored the slim shape squeezing past, her brown hair flying, her eyes flashing.

"Wait for me," Rick complained, as he cautiously threaded his way after her, along the half-familiar path. Silvia danced on





# the Dull Earth

By PHILIP K. DICK

Illustrated by VIDMER

without stopping. "Slow down!" he shouted angrily.

"Can't — we're late." Without warning, Silvia appeared in front of him, blocking the path. "Empty your pockets," she gasped, her gray eyes sparkling. "Throw away all metal. You know they can't stand metal."

Rick searched his pockets. In his overcoat were two dimes and a fifty-cent piece. "Do these count?"

"Yes!" Silvia snatched the coins and threw them into the dark heaps of calla lilies. The bits of metal hissed into the moist depths and were gone. "Anything else?"

She caught hold of his arm anxiously. "They're already on their way. Anything else, Rick?"

"Just my watch." Rick pulled his wrist away as Silvia's wild fingers snatched for the watch. "That's not going in the bushes."

"Then lay it on the sundial—or the wall. Or in a hollow tree." Silvia raced off again. Her excited, rapturous voice danced back to him. "Throw away your cigarette case. And your keys, your belt buckle—everything metal. You know how they hate metal. Hurry, we're late!"

**R**ICK followed sullenly after her. "All right, *witch*."

Silvia snapped at him furiously from the darkness. "Don't say that! It isn't true. You've been listening to my sisters and my mother and—"

Her words were drowned out by the sound. Distant flapping, a long way off, like vast leaves rustling in a winter storm. The night sky was alive with the frantic pounding; they were coming very quickly this time. They were too greedy, too desperately eager to wait. Flickers of fear touched the man and he ran to catch up with Silvia.

Silvia was a tiny column of green skirt and blouse in the center of the thrashing mass. She was pushing them away with one arm and trying to manage the faucet with the other. The churning activ-

ity of wings and bodies twisted her like a reed. For a time she was lost from sight.

"Rick!" she called faintly. "Come here and help!" She pushed them away and struggled up. "They're suffocating me!"

Rick fought his way through the wall of flashing white to the edge of the trough. They were drinking greedily at the blood that spilled from the wooden faucet. He pulled Silvia close against him; she was terrified and trembling. He held her tight until some of the violence and fury around them had died down.

"They're hungry," Silvia gasped feebly.

"You're a little cretin for coming ahead. They can sear you to ash!"

"I know. They can do anything." She shuddered, excited and frightened. "Look at them," she whispered, her voice husky with awe. "Look at the size of them—their wingspread. And they're *white*, Rick. Spotless—perfect. There's nothing in our world as spotless as that. Great and clean and wonderful."

"They certainly wanted the lamb's blood."

Silvia's soft hair blew against his face as the wings fluttered on all sides. They were leaving now, roaring up into the night sky. Not up, really—away. Back to their own world, whence they had

scented the blood. But it was not only the blood—they had come because of Silvia. *She* had attracted them.

The girl's gray eyes were wide. She reached up toward the rising white creatures. One of them swooped close. Grass and flowers sizzled as blinding white flames roared in a brief fountain. Rick scrambled away. The flaming figure hovered momentarily over Silvia and then there was a hollow *pop*. The last of the white-winged giants was gone. The air, the ground, gradually cooled into darkness and silence.

"I'm sorry," Silvia whispered.

"Don't do it again," Rick managed. He was numb with shock. "It isn't safe."

"Sometimes I forget. I'm sorry, Rick. I didn't mean to draw them so close." She tried to smile. "I haven't been that careless in months. Not since that other time, when I first brought you out here." The avid, wild look slid across her face. "Did you *see* him? Power and flames! And he didn't even touch us. He just—looked at us. That was all. And everything's burned up, all around."

Rick grabbed hold of her. "Listen," he grated. "You mustn't call them again. It's wrong. This isn't their world."

"It's not wrong—it's beautiful."

"It's not safe!" His fingers dug into her flesh until she gasped.

"Stop tempting them down here!"

Silvia laughed hysterically. She pulled away from him, out into the blasted circle that the horde of angels had seared behind them as they rose into the sky. "I can't *help* it," she cried. "I belong with them. They're my family, my people. Generations of them, back into the past."

"What do you mean?"

"They're my ancestors. And someday I'll join them."

"You are a little witch!" Rick shouted furiously.

"No," Silvia answered. "Not a witch, Rick. Don't you see? I'm a saint."

**T**HE kitchen was warm and bright. Silvia plugged in the Silex and got a big red can of coffee down from the cupboards over the sink. "You mustn't listen to them," she said, as she set out plates and cups and got cream from the refrigerator. "You know, they don't understand. Look at them in there."

Silvia's mother and her sisters, Betty Lou and Jean, stood huddled together in the living room, fearful and alert, watching the young couple in the kitchen. Walter Everett was standing by the fireplace, his face blank, remote.

"Listen to *me*," Rick said. "You have this power to attract them. You mean you're not—isn't Walter your real father?"

"Oh, yes—of course he is. I'm completely human. Don't I look human?"

"But you're the only one who has the power."

"I'm not physically different," Silvia said thoughtfully. "I have the ability to see, that's all. Others have had it before me—saints, martyrs. When I was a child, my mother read to me about St. Bernadette. Remember where her cave was? Near a hospital. They were hovering there and she saw one of them."

"But the blood! It's grotesque. There never was anything like that."

"Oh, yes. The blood draws them, lamb's blood especially. They hover over battlefields. Valkyries—carrying off the dead to Valhalla. That's why saints and martyrs cut and mutilate themselves. You know where I got the idea?"

Silvia fastened a little apron around her waist and filled the Silex with coffee. "When I was nine years old, I read of it in Homer, in the Odyssey. Ulysses dug a trench in the ground and filled it with blood to attract the spirits. The shades from the nether world."

"That's right," Rick admitted reluctantly. "I remember."

"The ghosts of people who died. They had lived once. Everybody lives here, then dies and goes

there." Her face glowed. "We're all going to have wings! We're all going to fly. We'll all be filled with fire and power. We won't be worms any more."

"Worms! That's what you always call me."

"Of course you're a worm. We're all worms—grubby worms creeping over the crust of the Earth, through dust and dirt."

"Why should blood bring them?"

"Because it's life and they're attracted by life. Blood is *uisge-beatha*—the water of life."

"Blood means death! A trough of spilled blood . . ."

"It's *not* death. When you see a caterpillar crawl into its cocoon, do you think it's dying?"

WALTER Everett was standing in the doorway. He stood listening to his daughter, his face dark. "One day," he said hoarsely, "they're going to grab her and carry her off. She wants to go with them. She's waiting for that day."

"You see?" Silvia said to Rick. "He doesn't understand either." She shut off the Silex and poured coffee. "Coffee for you?" she asked her father.

"No," Everett said.

"Silvia," Rick said, as if speaking to a child, "if you went away with them, you know you couldn't come back to us."

"We all have to cross sooner or later. It's part of our life."

"But you're only nineteen," Rick pleaded. "You're young and healthy and beautiful. And our marriage—what about our marriage?" He half-rose from the table. "Silvia, you've got to stop this!"

"I *can't* stop it. I was seven when I saw them first." Silvia stood by the sink, gripping the Silex, a faraway look in her eyes. "Remember, Daddy? We were living back in Chicago. It was winter. I fell, walking home from school." She held up a slim arm. "See the scar? I fell and cut myself on the gravel and slush. I came home crying—it was sleeting and the wind was howling around me. My arm was bleeding and my mitten was soaked with blood. And then I looked up and saw them."

There was silence.

"They want you," Everett said wretchedly. "They're flies—blue-bottles, hovering around, waiting for you. Calling you to come along with them."

"Why not?" Silvia's gray eyes were shining and her cheeks radiated joy and anticipation. "You've seen them, Daddy. You know what it means. Transfiguration—from clay into gods!"

Rick left the kitchen. In the living room, the two sisters stood together, curious and uneasy. Mrs. Everett stood by herself, her face

granite-hard, eyes bleak behind her steel-rimmed glasses. She turned away as Rick passed them.

"What happened out there?" Betty Lou asked him in a taut whisper. She was fifteen, skinny and plain, hollow-cheeked, with mousy, sand-colored hair. "Silvia never lets us come out with her."

"Nothing happened," Rick answered.

Anger stirred the girl's barren face. "That's not true. You were both out there in the garden, in the dark, and—"

"Don't talk to him!" her mother snapped. She yanked the two girls away and shot Rick a glare of hatred and misery. Then she turned quickly from him.

**R**ICK opened the door to the basement and switched on the light. He descended slowly into the cold, damp room of concrete and dirt, with its unwinking yellow lights hanging from dust-covered wires overhead.

In one corner loomed the big floor furnace with its mammoth hot air pipes. Beside it stood the water heater and discarded bundles, boxes of books, newspapers and old furniture, thick with dust, encrusted with strings of spider webs.

At the far end were the washing machine and spin dryer. And Silvia's pump and refrigeration system.

From the workbench Rick selected a hammer and two heavy pipe wrenches. He was moving toward the elaborate tanks and pipes when Silvia appeared abruptly at the top of the stairs, her coffee cup in one hand.

She hurried quickly down to him. "What are you doing down here?" she asked, studying him intently. "Why that hammer and those two wrenches?"

Rick dropped the tools back onto the bench. "I thought maybe this could be solved on the spot."

Silvia moved between him and the tanks. "I thought you understood. They've always been a part of my life. When I brought you with me the first time, you seemed to see what—"

"I don't want to lose you," Rick said harshly, "to anybody or anything—in this world or any other. *I'm not going to give you up.*"

"It's not giving me up!" Her eyes narrowed. "You came down here to destroy and break everything. The moment I'm not looking you'll smash all this, won't you?"

"That's right."

Fear replaced anger on the girl's face. "Do you want me to be chained here? I have to go on—I'm through with this part of the journey. I've stayed here long enough."

"Can't you wait?" Rick demanded furiously. He couldn't keep the ragged edge of despair

out of his voice. "Doesn't it come soon enough anyhow?"

Silvia shrugged and turned away, her arms folded, her red lips tight together. "You want to be a worm always. A fuzzy, little creeping caterpillar."

"I want you."

"You can't *have* me!" She whirled angrily. "I don't have any time to waste with this."

"You have higher things in mind," Rick said savagely.

"Of course." She softened a little. "I'm sorry, Rick. Remember Icarus? You want to fly, too. I know it."

"In my time."

"Why not now? Why wait? You're afraid." She slid lithely away from him, cunning twisting her red lips. "Rick, I want to show you something. Promise me first—you won't tell anybody."

"What is it?"

"Promise?" She put her hand to his mouth. "I have to be careful. It cost a lot of money. Nobody knows about it. It's what they do in China—everything goes toward it."

"I'm curious," Rick said. Uncasiness flicked at him. "Show it to me."

**T**REMBLING with excitement, Silvia disappeared behind the huge, lumbering refrigerator, back into the darkness behind the web of frost-hard freezing coils. He

could hear her tugging and pulling at something. Scraping sounds, sounds of something large being dragged out.

"See?" Silvia gasped. "Give me a hand, Rick. It's heavy. Hardwood and brass—and metal lined. It's hand-stained and polished. And the carving—see the carving! Isn't it beautiful?"

"What is it?" Rick demanded huskily.

"It's my cocoon," Silvia said simply. She settled down in a contented heap on the floor, and rested her head happily against the polished oak coffin.

Rick grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to her feet. "You can't sit with that coffin, down here in the basement with—" He broke off. "What's the matter?"

Silvia's face was twisting with pain. She backed away from him and put her finger quickly to her mouth. "I cut myself—when you pulled me up—on a nail or something." A thin trickle of blood oozed down her fingers. She groped in her pocket for a handkerchief.

"Let me see it." He moved toward her, but she avoided him. "Is it bad?" he demanded.

"Stay away from me," Silvia whispered.

"What's wrong? Let me see it!"

"Rick," Silvia said in a low, intense voice, "get some water and adhesive tape. As quickly as pos-

sible." She was trying to keep down her rising terror. "I have to stop the bleeding."

"Upstairs?" He moved awkwardly away. "It doesn't look too bad. Why don't you . . ."

"Hurry." The girl's voice was suddenly bleak with fear. "Rick, hurry!"

Confused, he ran a few steps.

Silvia's terror poured after him. "No, it's too late," she called thinly. "Don't come back—keep away from me. It's my own fault. I trained them to come. *Keep away!* I'm sorry, Rick. *Oh—*" Her voice was lost to him, as the wall of the basement burst and shattered. A cloud of luminous white forced its way through and blazed out into the basement.

It was Silvia they were after. She ran a few hesitant steps toward Rick, halted uncertainly, then the white mass of bodies and wings settled around her. She shrieked once. Then a violent explosion blasted the basement into a shimmering dance of furnace heat.

He was thrown to the floor. The cement was hot and dry—the whole basement crackled with heat. Windows shattered as pulsing white shapes pushed out again. Smoke and flames licked up the walls. The ceiling sagged and rained plaster down.

Rick struggled to his feet. The furious activity was dying away.

The basement was a littered chaos. All surfaces were scorched black, seared and crusted with smoking ash. Splintered wood, torn cloth and broken concrete were strewn everywhere. The furnace and washing machine were in ruins. The elaborate pumping and refrigeration system—now a glittering mass of slag. One whole wall had been twisted aside. Plaster was rubbed over everything.

Silvia was a twisted heap, arms and legs doubled grotesquely. Shriveled, carbonized remains of fire-scorched ash, settling in a vague mound. What had been left behind were charred fragments, a brittle burned-out husk.

**I**T was a dark night, cold and intense. A few stars glittered like ice from above his head. A faint, dank wind stirred through the dripping calla lilies and whipped gravel up in a frigid mist along the path between the black roses.

He crouched for a long time, listening and watching. Behind the cedars, the big house loomed against the sky. At the bottom of the slope a few cars slithered along the highway. Otherwise, there was no sound. Ahead of him jutted the squat outline of the porcelain trough and the pipe that had carried blood from the refrigerator in the basement. The trough was empty and dry, except for a few leaves that had fallen in it.

Rick took a deep breath of thin night air and held it. Then he got stiffly to his feet. He scanned the sky, but saw no movement. They were there, though, watching and waiting—dim shadows, echoing into the legendary past, a line of god-figures.

He picked up the heavy gallon drums, dragged them to the trough and poured blood from a New Jersey abattoir, cheap-grade steer refuse, thick and clotted. It splashed against his clothes and he backed away nervously. But nothing stirred in the air above. The garden was silent, drenched with night fog and darkness.

He stood beside the trough, waiting and wondering if they were coming. They had come for Silvia, not merely for the blood. Without her there was no attraction but the raw food. He carried the empty metal cans over to the bushes and kicked them down the slope. He searched his pockets carefully, to make sure there was no metal on him.

Over the years, Silvia had nourished their habit of coming. Now she was on the other side. Did that mean they wouldn't come? Somewhere in the damp bushes something rustled. An animal or a bird?

In the trough the blood glistened, heavy and dull, like old lead. It was their time to come, but nothing stirred the great trees



above. He picked out the rows of nodding black roses, the gravel path down which he and Silvia had run—violently, he shut out the recent memory of her flashing eyes and deep red lips. The highway beyond the slope—the empty, deserted garden—the silent house in which her family huddled and waited. After a time, there was a dull, swishing sound. He tensed, but it was only a diesel truck lumbering along the highway, headlights blazing.

He stood grimly, his feet apart, his heels dug into the soft black ground. He wasn't leaving. He was staying there until they came. He wanted her back—at any cost.

**O**VERHEAD, foggy webs of moisture drifted across the moon. The sky was a vast barren plain, without life or warmth. The deathly cold of deep space, away from suns and living things. He gazed up until his neck ached. Cold stars, sliding in and out of the matted layer of fog. Was there anything else? Didn't they want to come, or weren't they interested in him? It had been Silvia who had interested them—now they had her.

Behind him there was a movement without sound. He sensed it and started to turn, but suddenly, on all sides, the trees and undergrowth shifted. Like cardboard props they wavered and ran to-

gether, blended dully in the night shadows. Something moved through them, rapidly, silently, then was gone.

They had come. He could feel them. They had shut off their power and flame. Cold, indifferent statues, rising among the trees, dwarfing the cedars—remote from him and his world, attracted by curiosity and mild habit.

"Silvia," he said clearly. "Which are you?"

There was no response. Perhaps she wasn't among them. He felt foolish. A vague flicker of white drifted past the trough, hovered momentarily and then went on without stopping. The air above the trough vibrated, then died into immobility, as another giant inspected briefly and withdrew.

Panic breathed through him. They were leaving again, receding back into their own world. The trough had been rejected; they weren't interested.

"Wait," he muttered thickly.

Some of the white shadows lingered. He approached them slowly, wary of their flickering immensity. If one of them touched him, he would sizzle briefly and puff into a dark heap of ash. A few feet away he halted.

"You know what I want," he said. "I want her back. She shouldn't have been taken yet."

Silence.

"You were too greedy," he said.

"You did the wrong thing. She was going to come over to you, eventually. She had it all worked out."

The dark fog rustled. Among the trees the flickering shapes stirred and pulsed, responsive to his voice. "*True*," came a detached, impersonal sound. The sound drifted around him, from tree to tree, without location or direction. It was swept off by the night wind to die into him echoes.

Relief settled over him. They had paused—they were aware of him—listening to what he had to say.

"You think it's right?" he demanded. "She had a long life here. We were going to marry, have children."

**T**HERE was no answer, but he was conscious of a growing tension. He listened intently, but he couldn't make out anything. Presently he realized a struggle was taking place, a conflict among them. The tension grew — more shapes flickered — the clouds, the icy stars, were obscured by the vast presence swelling around him.

"Rick!" A voice spoke close by. Wavering, drifting back into the dim regions of the trees and dripping plants. He could hardly hear it—the words were gone as soon as they were spoken. "Rick—help me get back."

"Where are you?" He couldn't



locate her. "What can I do?"

"I don't know." Her voice was wild with bewilderment and pain. "I don't understand. Something went wrong. They must have thought I—wanted to come right away. I *didn't*!"

"I know," Rick said. "It was an accident."



"They were waiting. The cocoon, the trough—but it was too soon." Her terror came across to him, from the vague distances of another universe. "Rick, I've changed my mind. I want to come back."

"It's not as simple as that."

"I know. Rick, time is different

on this side. I've been gone so long—your world seems to creep along. It's been years, hasn't it?"

"One week," Rick said.

"It was their fault. You don't blame me, do you? They know they did the wrong thing. Those who did it have been punished, but that doesn't help me." Misery

and panic distorted her voice so he could hardly understand her. "How can I come back?"

"Don't they know?"

"They say it can't be done." Her voice trembled. "They say they destroyed the clay part—it was incinerated. There's nothing for me to go back to."

Rick took a deep breath. "Make them find some other way. It's up to them. Don't they have the power? They took you over too soon—they must send you back. It's *their* responsibility."

**T**HE white shapes shifted un-  
casily. The conflict rose sharply; they couldn't agree. Rick warily moved back a few paces.

"They say it's dangerous." Silvia's voice came from no particular spot. "They say it was attempted once." She tried to control her voice. "The nexus between this world and yours is unstable. There are vast amounts of free-floating energy. The power we—on this side—have isn't really our own. It's a universal energy, tapped and controlled."

"Why can't they . . ."

"This is a higher continuum. There's a natural process of energy from lower to higher regions. But the reverse process is risky. The blood—it's a sort of guide to follow—a bright marker."

"Like moths around a light bulb," Rick said bitterly.

"If they send me back and something went wrong—" She broke off and then continued, "If they make a mistake, I might be lost between the two regions. I might be absorbed by the free energy. It seems to be partly alive. It's not understood. Remember Prometheus and the fire . . ."

"I see," Rick said, as calmly as he could.

"Darling, if they try to send me back, I'll have to find some shape to enter. You see, I don't exactly have a shape any more. There's no real material form on this side. What you see, the wings and the whiteness, are not really there. If I succeeded to make the trip back to your side . . ."

"You'd have to mold something," Rick said.

"I'd have to take something there—something of clay. I'd have to enter it and reshape it. As He did a long time ago, when the original form was put on your world."

"If they did it once, they can do it again."

"The One who did that is gone. He passed on upward." There was unhappy irony in her voice. "There are regions beyond this. The ladder doesn't stop here. Nobody knows where it ends, it just seems to keep on going up and up. World after world."

"Who decides about you?" Rick demanded.

"It's up to me," Silvia said faintly. "They say, if I want to take the chance, they'll try it."

"What do you think you'll do?" he asked.

"I'm afraid. What if something goes wrong? You haven't seen it, the region between. The possibilities there are incredible—they terrify me. He was the only one with enough courage. Everyone else has been afraid."

"It was their fault. They have to take responsibility."

"They know that." Silvia hesitated miserably. "Rick, darling, please tell me what to do."

"Come back!"

Silence. Then her voice, thin and pathetic. "All right, Rick. If you think that's the right thing."

"It is," he said firmly. He forced his mind not to think, not to picture or imagine anything. *He had to have her back.* "Tell them to get started now. Tell them—"

A deafening crack of heat burst in front of him. He was lifted up and tossed into a flaming sea of pure energy. They were leaving and the scalding lake of sheer power bellowed and thundered around him. For a split-second, he thought he glimpsed Silvia, her hands reaching imploringly toward him.

Then the fire cooled and he lay blinded in dripping, night-moistened darkness. Alone in the silence.

WALTER Everett was helping him up. "You damn fool!" he was saying, again and again. "You shouldn't have brought them back. They've got enough from us."

Then he was in the big, warm living room. Mrs. Everett stood silently in front of him, her face hard and expressionless. The two daughters hovered anxiously around him, fluttering and curious, eyes wide with morbid fascination.

"I'll be all right," Rick muttered. His clothing was charred and blackened. He rubbed black ash from his face. Bits of dried grass stuck to his hair—they had seared a circle around him as they'd ascended. He lay back against the couch and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Betty Lou Everett was forcing a glass of water into his hand.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"You should never have gone out there," Walter Everett repeated. "Why? Why'd you do it? You know what happened to her. You want the same thing to happen to you?"

"I want her back," Rick said quietly.

"Are you mad? You can't get her back. She's gone." His lips twitched convulsively. "You saw her."

Betty Lou was gazing at Rick intently. "What happened out there?" she demanded. "They came again, didn't they?"

Rick got heavily to his feet and left the living room. In the kitchen he emptied the water in the sink and poured himself a drink. While he was leaning warily against the sink, Betty Lou appeared in the doorway.

"What do you want?" Rick demanded.

The girl's thin face was flushed an unhealthy red. "I know something happened out there. You were feeding them, weren't you?" She advanced toward him. "You're trying to get her back?"

"That's right," Rick said.

Betty Lou giggled nervously. "But you can't. She's dead—her body's been cremated—I saw it." Her face worked excitedly. "Daddy always said that something bad would happen to her, and it did." She leaned close to Rick. "She was a witch! She got what she deserved!"

"She's coming back," Rick said.

"No!" Panic stirred the girl's drab features. "She *can't* come back. She's dead—like she always said—worm into butterfly—she's a butterfly!"

"Go inside," Rick said.

"You can't order me around," Betty Lou answered. Her voice rose hysterically. "This is *my* house. We don't want you around here any more. Daddy's going to tell you. He doesn't want you and I don't want you and my mother and sister . . ."

THE change came without warning. Like a film gone dead, Betty Lou froze, her mouth half open, one arm raised, her words dead on her tongue. She was suspended, an instantly lifeless thing raised slightly off the floor, as if caught between two slides of glass. A vacant insect, without speech or sound, inert and hollow. Not dead, but abruptly thinned back to primordial inanimacy.

Into the captured shell filtered new potency and being. It settled over her, a rainbow of life that poured into place eagerly—like hot fluid—into every part of her. The girl stumbled and moaned; her body jerked violently and pitched against the wall. A china teacup tumbled from an overhead shelf and smashed on the floor. The girl retreated numbly, one hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with pain and shock.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I cut myself." She shook her head and gazed up mutely at him, appealing to him. "On a nail or something."

"*Silvia!*" He caught hold of her and dragged her to her feet, away from the wall. It was *her* arm he gripped, warm and full and mature. Stunned gray eyes, brown hair, quivering breasts—she was now as she had been those last moments in the basement.

"Let's see it," he said. He tore her hand from her mouth and shakily examined her finger. There

was no cut, only a thin white line rapidly dimming. "It's all right, honey. You're all right. There's nothing wrong with you!"

"Rick, I was over *there*." Her voice was husky and faint. "They came and dragged me across with them." She shuddered violently. "Rick, am I actually *back*?"

He crushed her tight. "Completely back."

"It was so long. I was over there a century. Endless ages. I thought—" Suddenly she pulled away. "Rick . . ."

"What is it?"

Silva's face was wild with fear. "There's something wrong."

"There's nothing wrong. You've come back home and that's all that matters."

Silvia retreated from him. "But they took a living form, didn't they? Not discarded clay. They don't have the power, Rick. They altered His work instead." Her voice rose in panic. "A mistake—they should have known better than to alter the balance. It's unstable and none of them can control the . . ."

Rick blocked the doorway. "Stop talking like that!" he said fiercely. "It's worth it—*anything's* worth it. If they set things out of balance, it's their own fault."

"We can't turn it back!" Her voice rose shrilly, thin and hard, like drawn wire. "We've set it in motion, started the waves lapping

out. The balance He set up is *altered*."

"Come on, darling," Rick said. "Let's go and sit in the living room with your family. You'll feel better. You'll have to try to recover from this."

**T**HEY approached the three seated figures, two on the couch, one in the straight chair by the fireplace. The figures sat motionless, their faces blank, their bodies limp and waxen, dulled forms that did not respond as the couple entered the room.

Rick halted, uncomprehending. Walter Everett was slumped forward, newspaper in one hand, slippers on his feet; his pipe was still smoking in the deep ashtray on the arm of his chair. Mrs. Everett sat with a lapful of sewing, her face grim and stern, but strangely vague. An unformed face, as if the material were melting and running together. Jean sat huddled in a shapeless heap, a ball of clay wadded up, more formless each moment.

Abruptly Jean collapsed. Her arms fell loose beside her. Her head sagged. Her body, her arms and legs filled out. Her features altered rapidly. Her clothing changed. Colors flowed in her hair, her eyes, her skin. The waxen pallor was gone.

Pressing her finger to her lips she gazed up at Rick mutely. She

blinked and her eyes focused. "Oh," she gasped. Her lips moved awkwardly; the voice was faint and uneven, like a poor sound track. She struggled up jerkily, with uncoordinated movements that propelled her stiffly to her feet and toward him—one awkward step at a time—like a wire dummy.

"Rick, I cut myself," she said. "On a nail or something."

**W**HAT had been Mrs. Everett stirred. Shapeless and vague, it made dull sounds and flopped grotesquely. Gradually it hardened and shaped itself. "My finger," its voice gasped feebly. Like mirror echoes dimming off into darkness, the third figure in the easy chair took up the words. Soon, they were all of them repeating the phrase, four figures, their lips moving in unison.

"My finger. I cut myself, Rick."

Parrot reflections, receding mimics of words and movement. And the settling shapes were familiar in every detail. Again and again, repeated around him, twice on the couch, in the easy chair, close beside him—so close he could hear her breathe and see her trembling lips.

"What is it?" the Silvia beside him asked.

On the couch one Sylvia resumed its sewing—she was sewing methodically, absorbed in her work. In the deep chair another

took up its newspaper, its pipe and continued reading. One huddled, nervous and afraid. The one beside him followed as he retreated to the door. She was panting with uncertainty, her gray eyes wide, her nostrils flaring.

"Rick . . ."

He pulled the door open and made his way out onto the dark porch. Machinelike, he felt his way down the steps, through the pools of night collected everywhere, toward the driveway. In the yellow square of light behind him, Silvia was outlined, peering unhappily after him. And behind her, the other figures, identical, pure repetitions, nodding over their tasks.

He found his coupé and pulled out onto the road.

Gloomy trees and houses flashed past. He wondered how far it would go. Lapping waves spreading out—a widening circle as the imbalance spread.

He turned onto the main highway; there were soon more cars around him. He tried to see into them, but they moved too swiftly. The car ahead was a red Plymouth. A heavy-set man in a blue business suit was driving, laughing merrily with the woman beside him. He pulled his own coupé up close behind the Plymouth and followed it. The man flashed gold teeth, grinned, waved his plump hands. The girl was dark-haired,



pretty. She smiled at the man, adjusted her white gloves, smoothed down her hair, then rolled up the window on her side.

He lost the Plymouth. A heavy diesel truck cut in between them. Desperately he swerved around the truck and nosed in beyond the swift-moving red sedan. Presently it passed him and, for a moment, the two occupants were clearly framed. The girl resembled Silvia. The same delicate line of her small chin—the same deep lips, parting slightly when she smiled—the same slender arms and hands. It was Silvia. The Plymouth turned off and there was no other car ahead of him.

He drove for hours through the heavy night darkness. The gas gauge dropped lower and lower. Ahead of him dismal rolling countryside spread out, blank fields between towns and unwinking stars suspended in the bleak sky. Once, a cluster of red and yellow lights gleamed. An intersection—filling stations and a big neon sign. He drove on past it.

**A**T a single-pump stand, he pulled the car off the highway, onto the oil-soaked gravel. He climbed out, his shoes crunching the stones underfoot, as he grabbed the gas hose and unscrewed the cap of his car's tank. He had the tank almost full when the door of the drab station build-

ing opened and a slim woman in white overalls and navy shirt, with a little cap lost in her brown curls, stepped out.

"Good evening, Rick," she said quietly.

He put back the gas hose. Then he was driving out onto the highway. Had he screwed the cap back on again? He didn't remember. He gained speed. He had gone over a hundred miles. He was nearing the state line.

At a little roadside café, warm, yellow light glowed in the chill gloom of early morning. He slowed the car down and parked at the edge of the highway in the deserted parking lot. Bleary-eyed he pushed the door open and entered.

Hot, thick smells of cooking ham and black coffee surrounded him, the comfortable sight of people eating. A juke box blared in the corner. He threw himself onto a stool and hunched over, his head in his hands. A thin farmer next to him glanced at him curiously and then returned to his newspaper. Two hard-faced women across from him gazed at him momentarily. A handsome youth in denim jacket and jeans was eating red beans and rice, washing it down with steaming coffee from a heavy mug.

"What'll it be?" the pert blonde waitress asked, a pencil behind her ear, her hair tied back in a tight



bun. "Looks like you've got some hangover, mister."

He ordered coffee and vegetable soup. Soon he was eating, his hands working automatically. He found himself devouring a ham and cheese sandwich; had he ordered it? The juke box blared and people came and went. There was a little town sprawled beside the road, set back in some gradual hills. Gray sunlight, cold and sterile, filtered down as morning came. He ate hot apple pie and sat wiping dully at his mouth with a paper napkin.

The café was silent. Outside nothing stirred. An uneasy calm hung over everything. The juke box had ceased. None of the people at the counter stirred or spoke.

An occasional truck roared past, damp and lumbering, windows rolled up tight.

**W**HEN he looked up, Silvia was standing in front of him. Her arms were folded and she gazed vacantly past him. A bright yellow pencil was behind her ear. Her brown hair was tied back in a hard bun. At the counter others were sitting, other Silvias, dishes in front of them, half-dozing or eating, some of them reading. Each the same as the next, except for their clothing.

He made his way back to his parked car. In half an hour he had crossed the state line. Cold, bright sunlight sparkled off dew-moist roofs and sidewalks as he



sped through tiny unfamiliar towns.

Along the shiny morning streets he saw them moving—early risers, on their way to work. In twos and threes they walked, their heels echoing in the sharp silence. At bus stops he saw groups of them collected together. In the houses, rising from their beds, eating breakfast, bathing, dressing, were more of them—hundreds of them, legions without number. A town of them preparing for the day, resuming their regular tasks, as the circle widened and spread.

He left the town behind. The car slowed under him as his foot slid heavily from the gas pedal. Two of them walked across a level field together. They carried books

—children on their way to school. Repetitions, unvarying and identical. A dog circled excitedly after them, unconcerned, his joy untainted.

He drove on. Ahead a city loomed, its stern columns of office buildings sharply outlined against the sky. The streets swarmed with noise and activity as he passed through the main business section. Somewhere, near the center of the city, he overtook the expanding periphery of the circle and emerged beyond. Diversity took the place of the endless figures of Silvia. Gray eyes and brown hair gave way to countless varieties of men and women, children and adults, of all ages and appearances. He increased his speed and

raced out on the far side, onto the wide four-lane highway.

He finally slowed down. He was exhausted. He had driven for hours; his body was shaking with fatigue.

**A** HEAD of him a carrot-haired youth was cheerfully thumbing a ride, a thin bean-pole in brown slacks and light camel's-hair sweater. Rick pulled to a halt and opened the front door. "Hop in," he said.

"Thanks, buddy." The youth hurried to the car and climbed in as Rick gathered speed. He slammed the door and settled gratefully back against the seat. "It was getting hot, standing there."

"How far are you going?" Rick demanded.

"All the way to Chicago." The youth grinned shyly. "Of course, I don't expect you to drive me that far. Anything at all is appreciated." He eyed Rick curiously. "Which way you going?"

"Anywhere," Rick said. "I'll drive you to Chicago."

"It's two hundred miles!"

"Fine," Rick said. He steered over into the left lane and gained speed. "If you want to go to New York, I'll drive you there."

"You feel all right?" The youth moved away uneasily. "I sure appreciate a lift, but . . ." He hesitated. "I mean, I don't want to take you out of your way."

Rick concentrated on the road ahead, his hands gripped hard around the rim of the wheel. "I'm going fast. I'm not slowing down or stopping."

"You better be careful," the youth warned, in a troubled voice. "I don't want to get in an accident."

"I'll do the worrying."

"But it's dangerous. What if something happens? It's too risky."

"You're wrong," Rick muttered grimly, eyes on the road. "It's worth the risk."

"But if something goes wrong—" The voice broke off uncertainly and then continued, "I might be lost. It would be so easy. It's all so unstable." The voice trembled with worry and fear. "Rick, please . . ."

Rick whirled. "How do you know my name?"

The youth was crouched in a heap against the door. His face had a soft, molten look, as if it were losing its shape and sliding together in an unformed mass. "I want to come back," he was saying, from within himself, "but I'm afraid. You haven't seen it—the region between. It's nothing but energy, Rick. He tapped it a long time ago, but nobody else knows how."

**T**HE voice lightened, became clear and treble. The hair faded to a rich brown. Gray,

frightened eyes flickered up at Rick. Hands frozen, he hunched over the wheel and forced himself not to move. Gradually he decreased speed and brought the car over into the right-hand lane.

"Are we stopping?" the shape beside him asked. It was Silvia's voice now. Like a new insect, drying in the sun, the shape hardened and locked into firm reality. Silvia struggled up on the seat and peered out. "Where are we? We're between towns."

He jammed on the brakes, reached past her and threw open the door. "Get out!"

Silvia gazed at him uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean?" she faltered. "Rick, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Get out!"

"Rick, I don't understand." She slid over a little. Her toes touched the pavement. "Is there something wrong with the car? I thought everything was all right."

He gently shoved her out and slammed the door. The car leaped ahead, out into the stream of mid-morning traffic. Behind him the small, dazed figure was pulling itself up, bewildered and injured. He forced his eyes from the rear-view mirror and crushed down the gas pedal with all his weight.

The radio buzzed and clicked in vague static when he snapped it briefly on. He turned the dial and, after a time, a big network

station came in. A faint, puzzled voice, a woman's voice. For a time he couldn't make out the words. Then he recognized it and, with a pang of panic, switched the thing off.

Her voice. Murmuring plaintively. Where was the station? Chicago. The circle had already spread that far.

HE slowed down. There was no point hurrying. It had already passed him by and gone on. Kansas farms—sagging stores in little old Mississippi towns—along the bleak streets of New England manufacturing cities swarms of brown-haired gray-eyed women would be hurrying.

It would cross the ocean. Soon it would take in the whole world. Africa would be strange—kraals of white-skinned young women, all exactly alike, going about the primitive chores of hunting and fruit-gathering, mashing grain, skinning animals. Building fires and weaving cloth and carefully shaping razor-sharp knives.

In China . . . he grinned inanely. She'd look strange there, too. In the austere high-collar suit, the almost monastic robe of the young Communist cadres. Parades marching up the main streets of Peiping. Row after row of slim-legged full-breasted girls, with heavy Russian-made rifles. Carrying spades, picks, shovels. Columns of cloth-booted

soldiers. Fast-moving workers with their precious tools. Reviewed by an identical figure on the elaborate stand overlooking the street, one slender arm raised, her gentle, pretty face expressionless and wooden.

He turned off the highway onto a side road. A moment later he was on his way back, driving slowly, listlessly, the way he had come.

AT an intersection a traffic cop waded out through traffic to his car. He sat rigid, hands on the wheel, waiting numbly.

"Rick," she whispered pleadingly as she reached the window. "Isn't everything all right?"

"Sure," he answered dully.

She reached in through the open window and touched him imploringly on the arm. Familiar fingers, red nails, the hand he knew so well. "I want to be with you so badly. Aren't we together again? Aren't I back?"

"Sure."

She shook her head miserably. "I don't understand," she repeated. "I thought it was all right again."

Savagely he put the car into motion and hurtled ahead. The intersection was left behind.

It was afternoon. He was exhausted, riddled with fatigue. He guided the car toward his own town automatically. Along the streets she hurried everywhere, on

all sides. She was omnipresent. He came to his apartment building and parked.

The janitor greeted him in the empty hall. Rick identified him by the greasy rag clutched in one hand, the big push-broom, the bucket of wood shavings. "Please," she implored, "tell me what it is, Rick. Please tell me."

He pushed past her, but she caught at him desperately. "Rick, *I'm back*. Don't you understand? They took me too soon and then they sent me back again. It was a mistake. I won't ever call them again—that's all in the past." She followed after him, down the hall to the stairs. "I'm never going to call them again."

He climbed the stairs. Silvia hesitated, then settled down on the bottom step in a wretched, unhappy heap, a tiny figure in thick workman's clothing and huge cleated boots.

He unlocked his apartment door and entered.

THE late afternoon sky was a deep blue beyond the windows. The roofs of nearby apartment buildings sparkled white in the sun.

His body ached. He wandered clumsily into the bathroom—it seemed alien and unfamiliar, a difficult place to find. He filled the bowl with hot water, rolled up his sleeves and washed his face and hands in the swirling hot

steam. Briefly, he glanced up.

It was a terrified reflection that showed out of the mirror above the bowl, a face, tear-stained and frantic. The face was difficult to catch—it seemed to waver and slide. Gray eyes, bright with terror. Trembling red mouth, pulse-fluttering throat, soft brown hair. The face gazed out pathetically—and then the girl at the bowl bent to dry herself.

She turned and moved wearily out of the bathroom into the living room.

Confused, she hesitated, then threw herself onto a chair and closed her eyes, sick with misery and fatigue.

"Rick," she murmured pleadingly. "Try to help me. I'm back, aren't I?" She shook her head, bewildered. "Please, Rick. I thought everything was all right."

*Philip K. Dick*

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# reluctant adam

By ROBERT RICHARD

*Organizing his Garden of Eden*

*was a cinch, but there was a  
snake in the grass—himself!*

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

**T**HE elf materialized in mid-air, hovered for a moment beating its wings gently, then came to rest on the ground beside the sleeping man.

"Good morning," it said cheerfully.

Rudy felt no answering cheer. "Go away!" he mumbled groggily.

Obligingly, the elf disappeared, but the damage was done. The man reluctantly sat up in his sleeping bag. The sun was already strong and his conscience forbade dallying. After he had wriggled out, he pulled the sleeping bag from beneath the wing of the wrecked plane and rolled it with great neatness, smoothing out the wrinkles

and brushing off the dirt, leaves and grass.

With the water he had brought the night before, he washed and shaved and brushed his teeth, counting the strokes. He put on his uniform carefully and, thus resplendent, sallied forth.

At a discreet distance, a horde of the little people had gathered to gawk through the trees, and his appearance caused a murmur of excitement, which he stolidly ignored. His plane had skidded halfway across the glade, smashing to a halt just in the shade of the towering trees. Another ten feet and he would have been dead. But ten feet less, and the plane would have



been visible to one of the searching planes that had droned their way overhead. It looked like a Latin-American standoff.

HE moved out into the meadow, carrying a few more sticks to add to the huge pile of wood he had built. The ground was charred from previous futile fires, and it had been almost a week since he had heard a plane.

He sternly repelled discouragement and, with a proud back, retraced his footsteps to the shelter of the woods. The friendly elf appeared beside him and matched his pace with a kind of skipping dance.

He made the round of his traps and was surprised to find five of them demolished.

"Some bears around here," the elf informed him.

Methodically, Rudy moved on and found a trapped rabbit. He eyed it dubiously.

The elf was curious. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to eat it," Rudy announced. And, having declared himself, he had no alternative.

He made a messy job of cleaning it, winding up with very little rabbit. He built a fire and proceeded with the cooking, fumbling a great deal. After a time, he gingerly tasted the result. Beneath its charcoaled exterior, the rabbit was still raw. Most unsatisfactory.

The elf made sympathetic

sounds that Rudy found infuriating, but he restrained himself.

"My technique is doubtless very poor," he admitted. "In time, I hope to become more proficient."

He gnawed manfully at the mess. "Would you care to join me?"

The sprite declined hastily. "I just came along because I thought you might be lonely."

Rudy set his obstinate chin. "Loneliness is a state of mind. The fact that I am temporarily separated from the rest of the human race has no effect upon my emotional stability."

The elf became excited. "You mean you're a *human being*?"

"Certainly! What did you think I was?"

"I didn't one way or another. To think that you're a human being! It's just wonderful."

A suspicion touched Rudy. "What's so wonderful?"

"That you're a human. I never saw one before. Of course, I've heard a lot about them."

"From whom?"

"Third Order. They lived with your people, you know."

"I didn't know. Why did they live with us?"

The elf shrugged. "They don't tell us why. It's just something you do when you grow up."

"You mean you're not fully grown?"

The answer came with a giggle.

"Of course not! I'm just a baby—First Order. Next year I'll make Second Order and I'll go out."

"And when you come back?"

"Then I'll be Third Order and have the right to boss the elves around." He went into a skipping dance. "You can't do this and you can't do that," he sang piercingly.

This impromptu entertainment was cut short by the appearance of three more elves, who came flitting madly through the trees.

"Mr. Blodgett is coming; Mr. Blodgett is coming!" they shrilled in chorus.

**W**ITH a yelp of pure dismay, Rudy's companion leaped into the air and faded into nothingness. The others, their mission completed, also made haste to disappear, and Rudy found himself alone in a strangely quiet forest.

He stared thoughtfully at the vacant space. He was aware that enforced solitude often resulted in such hallucinations, but the completeness of the illusions shook him. He felt that the safest course was to accept them without struggle, but with full realization that they were imaginary.

He finished his meal and made sure that the fire was completely out, then made his way back to the plane and carefully re-examined the contents of the survival kit. He hefted the packets of seed, wondering if the day would ever

come when he could personally thank the mad genius who had included them. It was true that he had never planted a seed in his life—but, then, he had never caught and cooked a rabbit before.

He had crashed the plane in a glade bordering on a small lake. The forest hemmed him in and, beyond it, on all sides, the mountains glowered down intimidatingly.

"A fine place for a farm," he told himself reassuringly, accepting the fact that he would be there for some time.

He had just begun to break the soil when a neat little man appeared. He was about half the size of a small midget, dressed smartly and wearing a green derby hat.

"How do you do?" He extended his hand. "I am Mr. Blodgett."

A little startled, Rudy took the tiny hand and shook it gingerly. "How do *you* do? I'm Major Rudolph Collins of the United States Air Force."

"I must apologize for not calling sooner," Mr. Blodgett said in an urbane voice. "Naturally, we knew that a plane had crashed, but we had to keep out of sight until the possibility of your rescue was negligible. I offer this as a reason, not an excuse. Military expediency, you might say. I hope you will forgive our seeming rudeness. It was nothing of the sort, you know."

Rudy felt constrained to bow before such blunt formality. "That's quite all right. It is I who should apologize for disturbing your privacy."

Mr. Blodgett rubbed his hands. "Well, I'm glad that polite nonsense is out of the way. Now we can get down to business."

The switch was confusing. "I beg your pardon?"

"Protocol, of course. Now for the smoke-filled room."

"Uh—yes," Rudy said in bewilderment.

The little man eyed him narrowly. "Say! Are you an American?"

Rudy drew himself up stiffly. "Can't you see that I'm wearing the uniform of my country?"

**M**R. Blodgett nodded. "That's good enough, I guess. I'm strictly from Uncle Sam myself. That's the reason they assigned me to you. Let's start from A. How did you happen to land here?"

"Frankly, I don't think that's any of your business."

"Oh, fine!" Mr. Blodgett complained aloud. "I get all the characters. All right, let's take it from the other end. You're doing some hunting and fishing and making like a farmer, so it looks like you realize that your stay may be permanent."

"I realize no such thing. I have every expectation of eventually returning to civilization."

"So much for the great expectations—now for the hard times. Do you have enough emergency rations, or did the quartermaster slip you cases of socks instead of the hash that you ordered?"

"I have plenty of food," Rudy said in a stiff voice.

Mr. Blodgett sighed. "I can see that all I'll get out of you is your name, rank and serial number. I take it you're from the Canal Zone. How did you happen to get this far south? Was it that major-league storm that kissed the coast about two weeks ago?"

"I did get caught in that storm," Rudy admitted.

"And you got lost! Imagine a major in the United States Air Force getting lost! They'll take away your chicken-inspector badge!"

"I did *not* get lost! I knew where I was at all times, but I had no choice except to ride the storm until I ran out of fuel."

Mr. Blodgett was suspicious. "You're a long way from the corner drugstore, but those rescue planes didn't miss by much. How did they get so close? Is your radio working?"

"Unfortunately, no. They probably placed me from the velocity and direction of the storm and the amount of fuel I had."

"Very clever! Too bad for both of us that they didn't succeed."

"I expect that there will be other

planes, commercial transports and so forth. Eventually, my signal fire will be seen."

Mr. Blodgett shook his head. "These mountains are too mean to play around in. Pan-American routes over them, but not near here. Any plane coming this way has too many troubles of its own to worry about you."

"Then it may be necessary for me to hike out."

"You'd have to be a mountain goat to get out of this crater, and that would only be the beginning. You'd better abandon that idea pronto."

RUDY'S voice grew cold. "You have outside contacts. If you can make it, I can."

"You call that logic? Please notice that you wear your wings on your chest while I wear mine on my shoulder-blades."

"If you're just trying to discourage me, don't bother. It can't be done. According to my calculations, I'm in the Andes. Probably somewhere in Peru. I don't think I'd have to travel far to get help."

"I see. The mayor is waiting right over the next rise with the keys to the city."

Rudy flushed. "Peru has a sizable population . . ."

"Not around here. You could travel for a month and never see an Indian. And if you did see one, you might be sorry."

"Nevertheless, I shall try it as soon as I am certain that rescue is improbable."

Mr. Blodgett showed his admiration. "You're a tough nut, eh, boy?"

Rudy went into his stiffening act. "The United States Air Force . . ."

Mr. Blodgett held up a tiny hand. "If you only knew how many Fourth of July speeches I've listened to, you'd spare me the rest of what you were going to say."

"I take it that you're a native of this region," Rudy said, changing course in hope of a tail wind, so to speak.

"Not really. But there are no true natives, so I'll plead guilty."

"But you are different from the others."

"What others?"

"The little fellows that keep appearing and disappearing."

Mr. Blodgett turned red, then white, then an odd shade of green.

"The elves!" he spluttered. "Every one of them was warned specifically and emphatically. This is impudence! Flagrant insubordination!"

"You mean they weren't supposed to come?"

"Certainly not! Suppose you had been rescued and gone around talking about disappearing elves—"

"Not me!" Rudy spoke with certainty. "I have no desire for a psychoneurotic label."

"Perhaps not. But that doesn't excuse those little monsters. If I've told Oberon once, I've told him a thousand times that he's too easy with them. I can tell you, it was different when I was a youngster."

"Oberon?"

"Our King," Mr. Blodgett explained.

Rudy struggled with his memory for a moment. "You must be fairies!" he exclaimed. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why I'm imagining you. I knew there had to be a basis somewhere, but I couldn't place it before."

**M**R. Blodgett became indignant. "Now see here, Collins, I had to put up with that nonsense when I was living with you people, but I'm not going to knuckle under in my own territory. I'm as real as you are."

Rudy ignored him. "It's odd the way my senses collaborate in deluding me. The illusion is so strong that I cannot help talking to you, even though I know you do not exist."

Mr. Blodgett impatiently threw a rock at him.

Rudy stared at the bruise. "Amazing, the extent of self-deception!"

Mr. Blodgett howled with rage. "If I'm a hallucination, then you're a hallucination! What makes you

think that you exist? You could be just a figment of my imagination!"

"You insist you're real?"

Mr. Blodgett drew himself up proudly. "*Cogito, ergo sum!*"

"Then, of course, you'll have a logical explanation for your disappearing friends."

"Now that's more like it. At least your mind is open. Fairies disappear by altering the molecules of their bodies, so that they have the same refractive index as air."

After thinking this out, Rudy said, "I seem to remember my physics instructor making a glass tube disappear in a mixture of liquids. That the sort of thing that you mean?"

"Exactly. You stay here long enough and your hallucinations will educate you."

"What about clothing? Why isn't it left behind when the alleged elves disappear?"

"They don't wear any. They just alter their skin as artistically as they can to simulate clothes."

"But you certainly are wearing clothes."

"Yes, but we older fairies have the ability to alter matter outside of our bodies. So, when I disappear, I just fix what I'm wearing to make it become invisible, too."

Rudy knelt and fingered the coat. "It feels real to me," he declared.

"You think I can't take it with me?"

"That's just what I think."

"Watch me!" And Mr. Blodgett was gone.

Rudy went back to his work with a glance at his watch. "A great deal of time wasted," he muttered. "I never thought I'd reach the stage where I'd have to play tricks on myself!"

**F**OR a week, there was peace. Rudy outlined his farm, extended his trapping range and built a small lean-to for shelter. He worked methodically and carefully, and kept extraneous thinking to a minimum. Then Mr. Blodgett paid his second visit.

"I wish you'd leave me alone," Rudy complained. "I have a great deal of work to do."

"I bet you think you're some punkins, the way you slicked me."

Rudy grinned. "Will it work again?"

"It didn't work then. I could have reappeared immediately, but there was no point in arguing with you."

"Good! Now that you've reached that conclusion, will you please go away?"

"Can't do it. We have to look after humans—even the stupid, obstinate ones. So, believe it or not, here I am to stay!"

"I'm much happier alone," Rudy insisted, annoyed.

"Nobody's happy alone. We held a long conference and we de-

cided that what you need is a companion, a helpmeet—someone to share your sorrows and joys."

"And you're it?"

"No, no, a thousand times no! What you need is a female woman—a slick chick—a frail quail."

"Are you telling me that you can provide me with one?"

Mr. Blodgett nodded happily. "I knew that if I made it simple enough, you'd catch on."

"This is more like it," Rudy said, thoughtful. "A man's hallucinations usually take the female form. You had me feeling quite uneasy, you know."

The fairy's eyes sparkled dangerously, but he kept his voice even. "You're agreeable then?"

"If I have to see things, a woman would be preferable to a fast-talking freak."

"Good." Mr. Blodgett ignored the insult. "Now just tell me what kind of female fills your dreams."

"You mean I can have one made to order?"

"Within reason. Once she's here, you have to accept her, to love and cherish and so forth, so we'll do our best to match specifications. But don't get too extravagant. Let's start with the rough dimensions. What height and weight?"

Rudy scratched his chin. "I'd say about my height."

"Mister, you're five-foot-ten!" Mr. Blodgett exclaimed.

Rudy nodded. "She should

weigh about one-sixty, with plenty of muscle."

"Are you talking about a woman or a horse? Why such a big girl?"

"If she is to share life with me in this wilderness, I want her to be able to do her share."

"Very sensible, no doubt. How about coloring?"

"Dark, I think. The sun is quite hot here."

"Well, that makes sense," Mr. Blodgett said. "But five-foot-ten and 160 pounds! That's a lot of woman. Look, I'll tell you what—I'll add a pretty face. You won't notice it, but I'll add it, anyway."

**R**UDY was satisfied. "That about sums it up."

"You're absolutely sure?" Mr. Blodgett persisted. "No changes or corrections?"

"None that I can think of at the moment."

"It's speak now or forever hold your peace. Okay, we'll do our best."

"You mean you're going to need help?"

"Mister, yours is a tall order, and that isn't just a sickly pun. There's about three thousand adult fairies in this community and every one of them will be working like mad on this project. We may even have to import a couple of experts from Brazil, but I hope not. Those lowlanders are really lowlifes."

"And how will you accomplish this?"

"Transmutation," the little man explained.

"I assume that that's a fancy name for fairy magic."

"Magic, schmagic! I told you we could alter matter to some extent. Surely you will accept the fact that, after our long association with you, we could build a human female correct to the last detail."

"And alive?"

"Well, we can't actually *create* anything. Some fairy will have to supply the life force."

"Just like that?"

"Not quite. It's a difficult process, but we're quite familiar with it, since it's part of our life cycle."

"What does that mean?" Rudy demanded relentlessly. "Be specific."

"I've no doubt you've heard that fairies are immortal. It's not strictly true. What happens is that, when this body wears out, I shall, with the help of my friends, create an elf body and, in time, transmit my life force to it. Of course, this body is then dead and the resultant elf is new-born, with no awareness of previous existence."

"You still haven't told me how it's done."

"The actual act happens to be quite personal. As for the mechanics of it—I hate to admit it, but I've reached the point at which I have to say I don't know. And

what a comedown that is!"

"So all your gibberish comes to nothing," Rudy said, irritated.

"Don't be silly. A bat flies by sonar—would you ask a bat to explain it?"

"I don't think the analogy is at all apt."

"Then I'll give you one that is. Go to a maternity hospital and watch the father look at a newborn baby. They always wear that stupid expression: 'Did I do that?' Well, that's the way it is. We can do it. I don't know how, but we can do it."

"It would be an interesting experiment," Rudy confessed.

"Now *there's* an understatement if I ever heard one."

"And how long would it take to build me a—well, female companion?"

"Two or three weeks."

Rudy's eyes lighted. He would be left alone again. "By all means, go ahead," he said enthusiastically.

**I**T was a month before the fairy returned. Rudy was just finishing a hard day. He was hot and dirty and tired, and his uniform was soiled. He was in no mood to coddle his errant imagination.

"What do you want?" he challenged angrily.

"I brought the bride, Buster."

"My name is not Buster."

"Stop fretting about what I call you—I'm imaginary. Here's your

imaginary girl friend."

She had been standing behind the plane and, when Mr. Blodgett pulled on her finger, she docilely made an entrance. Rudy stared and the girl stared back, her dark eyes on a line with his. Mr. Blodgett patted her olive skin.

"Isn't this some job? Guaranteed not to burn or peel."

"She's beautiful!" Rudy said.

"A good job. A *very* good job! She's big, but that's what you ordered."

"She's beautiful!" Rudy repeated.

"Don't worry about that silly look she's wearing. She's newborn, you know. All we taught her was how to walk. The rest is up to you. But she's intelligent—smart as they come. You'll find that out."

"She's beautiful!" Rudy said again.

"Beautiful?" the girl repeated doubtfully.

Mr. Blodgett was exultant. "See how quick she is? Say the same word a couple of times and she's got it."

Rudy pulled himself together. "She *is* beautiful," he stated, "but is she real?"

"That's something you'll have to fight out with yourself."

"I wasn't asking whether she's imaginary. I just won't believe that. I mean is she a robot?"

"Certainly not! Real as you and I. If you cut her, she'll bleed. That



sort of thing—she'll pass any test of reality you can think of."

Rudy felt awed. "I begin to remember what you said. She's a transmutation."

"Correct. The cutest little female fairy I ever saw went into the making of this hunk of woman."

"And she's not a fairy?"

Mr. Blodgett was impatient. "She's human all the way. There can be no memory of previous existence."

"Then she *is* real."

"And brand-new. Nobody to spoil her but you."

"I will make her," declared Rudy, "into the most wonderful wife a man ever had."

**M**R. Blodgett held up a finger. "A word of warning, chum. It will be easy to teach her, but pretty near impossible to unteach her. You can have her any way you want, but you can't change her at will."

Rudy nodded. "I understand. She will accept a basic behavior pattern, but thereafter she will adhere to that pattern and be beyond my influence."

"I think you've got it. To be specific—right now, this new-born baby hasn't even got diapers on. If you explain to her that nice girls wear clothes, she will be a modest maiden forthwith. But if you keep your big mouth shut, she will think nothing of it and con-

tinue to parade around in this bewitching fashion."

Rudy demurred. "I think that in time she would wonder why I wear clothes."

"I wonder myself," Mr. Blodgett confessed. "It's pretty hot right now and the nearest peeping Tom is a long way off, yet you always look as if you expect a blizzard. What's the story?"

"A major in the United States Air Force . . ." Rudy began, but the little hand stopped him.

"Sorry I asked. Let's get back to your baby. I was about to pass out some advice. Before you decide anything definite, just remember that emotions are fickle. Sometimes a man wants a sweet, demure bit of fluff, and other times he wants a girl a little—ah—bolder. You'd better proceed with caution."

Rudy saw no difficulties. "I shall form her into the most wonderful wife a man ever had," he insisted.

If Mr. Blodgett was dubious, he did not show it. "Well, goody for you! What are you going to call her?"

There was no hesitation. "I think Eve would be appropriate. Don't you?"

"By all means. Why be original when you can be appropriate?"

Rudy put his hand on the girl's arm and spoke to her. "Don't be afraid."

She looked at him with wide,

innocent eyes. "Beautiful?"

Mr. Blodgett decided it was time to leave.

He dropped in for a visit a month later.

"How's everything in the Garden of Eden?" he inquired.

Rudy came to meet him, grinning. "Just fine. My crops are starting to come up."

"Where's the bride?"

"Studying her lessons. I have her on a rigorous routine." He consulted his watch. "She has a half-hour to go."

"She catch on fast?"

"Very fast. I have no complaints."

"What does she do after she finishes studying?"

"We work in the field for a while, and then we get something done on the house." He pointed to a cleared space beside the lake.

"I can see you have no intention of spoiling her," Mr. Blodgett said.

Rudy's eyes glowed. "Definitely not. She will be the perfect wife!"

"Glad to hear it. I just dropped by to see if the merchandise was satisfactory."

"A hundred per cent." Rudy hesitated for a second. "I guess I owe you an apology."

"For saying I wasn't so? Forget it. All is forgiven. I'll be around from time to time, to watch the growth of this Utopia."

With a wave of his hand, Mr.

Blodgett disappeared among the trees.

EVE was very intelligent. At six months, she knew many words.

"Pretty house," she said distinctly.

"It's a cute shack," Mr. Blodgett agreed, "but strictly unnecessary in my book. What was the matter with the simple hut you were going to build?"

Rudy looked uncomfortable. "Well, that might have been all right for bachelor quarters, but a married couple needs more space."

Mr. Blodgett's eyebrows went up. "Because I'm a gentleman, I'll stifle the obvious remark. This is, beyond doubt, one slick shanty. You must have put in a lot of labor."

"You forget that Eve works right alongside me. She can do the work of any man."

"Work healthy," Eve pronounced.

"In your case, it must be," Mr. Blodgett admitted. "Roses in the cheeks, and so forth. I came to see if you were set for the winter."

"I didn't think there'd be much winter. We're ten degrees from the equator."

"You forget that this place is two miles above sea-level. The days aren't so bad, but the nights get real mean."

"Well, we have a fireplace. I

guess we can put in a store of wood."

"Then all you'll need is marshmallows."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Skip it. It didn't sound half as clever as I thought it would. How about wearing apparel?"

"I've managed to shoot three bears and I'm trying to tan their skins. I hope I'm successful."

"So do I. I certainly hope those bears shall not have died in vain."

"How about you?" Rudy countered. "I've ranged pretty far and I haven't seen any fairy houses yet."

"You won't, either. We have no need of shelters. If the temperature drops, we lessen the heat transmission of our skin. If a wind blows, we latch onto a tree."

"Like wood nymphs," Rudy commented.

"Sure. If we merged with the water, you could call us naiads. We're the *ne plus ultra* of adaptability."

Rudy shook his head. "You can adapt all you like. There's nothing more cozy than a roaring fire on a cold night."

Mr. Blodgett looked at Eve. "Well," he murmured, "one way or another you'll be warm this winter."

**A**T the end of a year, Eve, being very intelligent, knew a great many words.

"This heat is terrible," she complained.

"With a natural pool a hundred yards from your door, I can't see your squawk," Mr. Blodgett told her.

"I have my work to do," she returned stiffly.

"I see. No slackers here. Nor wind, nor rain, nor heat of sun . . ."

"I cannot abide a frivolous woman," Rudy declared flatly.

"So I notice. Not a scrap of frivolity around here. Not even in the corners."

"I scrubbed them this morning," she asserted.

"They look it," he hastened to reassure her. "I've never seen a cleaner house."

She smiled satisfaction and wiped her beautiful forehead. "This heat is terrible," she informed them again.

Rudy was proud. "She may complain about it, but she certainly doesn't let it stop her. She puts me to shame, the way she keeps going."

Mr. Blodgett frowned remembering. "You used to be pretty much nose-to-the-grindstone yourself."

"I think I have as much determination as any man," Rudy told him. "But I'm not in Eve's class. I have to admit that the like is pretty tempting to me at times, but Eve will have none of it."

"Very commendable—most hard-





able. You'll notice I always come visiting well stocked with superlatives. I need them when I call on two such superior people."

There was a double flush of pleasure. "That's very kind of you," said Rudy. "Are you staying for supper?"

"Supper is at six," Eve told him.

"At six exactly?"

Rudy suspected humor and became stiff. "I believe that meals should be at regular hours."

"I'm with you all the way," Mr. Blodgett was quick to agree. "It's just that I thought of a joke about supper at six."

"A joke?"

"Yes, but I forget how it goes. Just as well. I'm sure it's in poor taste."

"You'd enjoy eating with us," Rudy invited. "Eve is a fine cook."

"I'm sure of it."

"And there's a special satisfaction in eating something that you've grown yourself. The flavor is unique."

"I'll have to give you a blind-fold test sometime—which carrot tastes milder?"

Rudy laughed politely. "I think you're being evasive. Don't you fairies eat the same things we eat?"

Mr. Blodgett hesitated. "We eat some of the things you do, but only in very small quantities. Actually, we know very little about ourselves because, not being plagued with weaknesses, we never had any

need to study ourselves. But I rather imagine that we absorb a great deal of energy directly from the sun. After three or four days of rain, the fairies are a sad-looking bunch."

"Which is a long-winded way of saying that you won't stay."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"This heat is terrible," Eve said.

**E**VE was remarkably intelligent. At the end of two years, she knew entirely too many words.

"Why does she talk so much?" Rudy complained.

"She's a woman," Mr. Blodgett reminded him.

"That's not my fault."

"Certainly not."

"And this cleanliness phobia."

"That is."

"Ridiculous! All I did was explain that one's quarters must be kept spotless. No reasonable being could misinterpret that."

Mr. Blodgett eyed him keenly. "I imagine you did more than make a simple statement. In fact, you probably delivered a lecture. You might even have declared that Cleanliness is Next to Godliness. I wouldn't put it past you."

Rudy squirmed. "I may have said a couple of similar things."

"It's entirely your fault."

"No! I never went that far. 'Wipe your feet!' 'Don't dirty that!' 'Put that back where you got it!' I'm afraid to go home any more."

"And if you don't go home, she worries."

"Of course! 'Where have you been? Did you have to stay so long? You never think of me here all alone. You don't care what happens to me!' And then she cries—I didn't teach her to cry."

"Instinctive weapon."

"And to think that I molded her exactly the way I wanted her!"

"And now," Mr. Blodgett remarked, "she's molding you."

Rudy reached a decision. "The time has come for me to assert myself. If I want to go hunting, why shouldn't I go hunting?"

"Why not, indeed?"

"She acts as if I were enjoying myself. There's a lot of work in hunting."

"Sheer drudgery," Mr. Blodgett agreed.

"And we can use fresh meat."

"Naturally. Nobody wants to eat yesterday's meat."

"I shall tell her that tomorrow I am going hunting."

"That's right. Put your foot down."

Rudy laid aside the crude hoe he had been wielding. "I shall tell her right now."

"I'll wait outside," Mr. Blodgett said cautiously.

Rudy pushed through the door belligerently, and Eve came pattering to meet him.

"What is it, dear?"

He faltered. The subject of hunt-

ing, if broached now, would be dealt with at length throughout the night. The whole night.

"I'm hungry," he said, evading the problem.

But he had stumbled unsuspectingly into another one.

"Supper is at six," she reminded him with an angelic smile.

He was uncomfortably aware of Mr. Blodgett's keen ears a few feet away. He had to make a stand.

"I want to eat now," he declared.

"You'll have to wait." She wasn't argumentative, just definite.

He seized her arms above the elbows. "Let's understand each other. *What I say goes around here!*"

She was puzzled and hurt. "Of course, dear."

"Well, I want my supper right now, so get moving."

She shook her head. "Six o'clock."

He was not too angry to realize that she was far too big to take over his knee, so he simply threw her on the bed, face down, and began to whale away. By the third whack, she had analyzed the surprising situation. Coming to her feet, she picked him up and threw him out of the house.

"Supper is at six," she told him.

Mr. Blodgett eyed the fallen hero. "She's a big girl," he said pensively.

Rudy made no reply. He climb-

ed to his feet and dusted himself off carefully. Then, with grim purpose, he began to thread his way through the woods.

MR. Blodgett skipped along beside him. "What's on the agenda, chum?"

"I will not stay where I'm not wanted."

"Where are you going to go?"

"Out." Rudy waved his arm. "Over the mountain."

"Like the bear," Mr. Blodgett observed.

"Perhaps—" Rudy's voice trembled a little—"she will miss me when I am gone."

"Don't worry about that," Mr. Blodgett said in a cheerful tone. "We'll replace you."

Rudy became indignant. "You mean you'd make a man for her?"

"Sorry, chum. No favorites in this league."

There was coolness after that and they walked on without speaking until the trees ended abruptly against a rocky cliff. Rudy stared up and up at the unbroken expanse.

"It looks a little tough to climb," he admitted.

"Worse on the other side," Mr. Blodgett assured him.

Rudy stared at his companion thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "if you and a couple of your friends took hold of me, I'd bet you could carry me up."

"Don't be insulting! That has all the earmarks of manual labor!"

"I only asked a favor."

Mr. Blodgett shuddered. "Don't. Let's never bring up that subject again."

Rudy surveyed the wall again. "I shall just have to climb it," he said manfully.

"It'll be dark before you really get going," Mr. Blodgett pointed out.

"That's true." Rudy looked worried. "And I left Eve unprotected."

"From what I saw, she's capable of taking care of herself. You should have ordered a little kitten of a girl who was good for nothing but cuddling."

"I'd despise such a female!" said Rudy.

"Certainly. But you'd do a lot of cuddling."

"Eve is a fine woman."

"Who says she isn't?"

"And," Rudy continued, as if daring denial, "she is perfectly correct."

"She *is*?"

"Of course! What right have I to break the rules?"

Mr. Blodgett nodded thoughtfully. "Now that you put it that way, I can see you've acted like a skunk."

"I've behaved like a two-year-old."

"And Eve *is* a two-year-old. And two and two are four. And

four rhymes with more. And that reminds me . . ."

"What?"

"Perhaps she has a reason for being unreasonable."

"A reason?"

"Women sometimes behave very oddly. Pickles and ice cream. Nonsense like that."

**R**UDY was very dense. "What are you talking about?"

Mr. Blodgett looked at him sadly. "You don't know? It's believable. If ever there was a husband who wouldn't know, it's you."

"If you persist in talking in riddles . . ."

Mr. Blodgett's hand went up. "Be patient. I'm dusting off my routine about the patter of little feet."

Rudy's eyes grew wide. "You mean . . ."

"I mean," Mr. Blodgett told him. "Now your eyes light with ecstasy, and your body stiffens with surprise, and your face wears a stupid expression."

"But why didn't she tell me?"

"I can think of two reasons. First, you didn't ask her, so she didn't think you were interested. Second, she doesn't know herself." The fairy exhibited sudden delight. "Is *she* in for a surprise!"

Rudy suddenly broke into a run. "I must get home!" he shouted.

"But what about your trip?"

Rudy turned to glare without



halting. "Do you think I'd desert my wife at the time when she needs me most?"

"You should have tilted your head a bit more and placed your hand over your heart," Mr. Blodgett objected. "But, aside from that, it was very effective."

As they raced through the forest, the fairy was forced to skip madly to keep up with the pace.

"I assure you," he puffed, "you will be in plenty of time."

"My son!" Rudy's shout was a

proud vibrato. "I shall raise my son to be the finest man that ever lived!"

Mr. Blodgett stopped abruptly and stared after him in dismay. Rudy sped on to the house.

"I'm home, darling!" he called as he reached the door.

"Don't forget to wipe your feet," she said.



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## SPARE THAT TREE!

Some of the most aggressively unsuperstitious people are just as aggressively proud of their family tree . . . and yet if they knew the origin of that noble-sounding device, their faces would be as red as their blood is allegedly blue.

True enough, the diagram of a family tree looks pretty much like a tree, but that is purely coincidental. When a child was born, a tree was planted; the health of the tree supposedly determined the health of the individual. When land in Sussex, England, changed ownership, the new laird ordered a row of trees cut down and sold. The community threatened to riot—if the trees went, they argued, there wouldn't be a person alive in the village. The order was rescinded.

Ruling families were more likely to have a communal tree, representing the whole household, than the more plebeian one-tree-to-a-customer. The Edgewell Oak near Edinburgh, for instance, was responsible for all members of the family; whenever one of them was about to die, a branch, said the legend, prophetically fell off. (There is no report on the amount of string, wire and nails sold to the family.)

The St. Lawrence family in Ireland was kept going by a tree—and in 1913, when it looked as if the earls might go the way of the dinosaur, they kept the tree going by building a bulwark to keep it from toppling.

That, however, happened to the royal Guelphs of Hanover, Germany, when their oak fell. The king ordered the tree raised and propped, but a fat lot of good it did—Hanover was grabbed that same year by the Prussian monarchy. Same thing with the family tree of the Chinese Empire; though lavishly tended, it died in 1901, and the empire died with it.

**J**OSEPH Burnham put down the letter from his wife and gazed out at the Illinois countryside. So Peterson was dead. Dead in an upstate insane asylum. Why did wives have to write such things? Why did they have to have such things to write about? *Why?* Thoroughly depressed, he sat and stared through the window while the Super-Chief sped westward.

"Anything else, sir?" the steward inquired.

Burnham shook his head, ignoring the barely touched mixed grill in front of him. This will never do, he told himself. Have to be in shape for that conference on the Coast. He paid the bill and left.

In the club car, he tried to interest himself in a magazine, but the thought of Peterson was annoyingly present. Only five years ago — brilliant, young, full of promise, and then suddenly . . .

Waste, thought Burnham, what a terrible, terrible waste! He tried to tell himself it hadn't really been his fault. He wished he were back home, so that he could look up Fred Bailey and talk it over with him. Wistfully, he thought ahead to the people he would be seeing in San Francisco. The need to find a friendly, receptive ear was strong, but there would be none until he returned to New York, so he decided to have a drink in-



## *Queen's Mate*

By JEAN M. JANIS

*Warning to chess fiends:*

*Don't make a move—*

*It means death!*

Illustrated by ASHMEN

stead. He put aside his magazine and glanced around. The club car was empty, except for himself, the steward at the far end and a couple across the aisle. He was about to signal the steward when a familiar sound caught his ear and he looked, instead, at the couple. Chess!

The coincidence of his unhappy thoughts about Peterson and the sight of the miniature chess board made him feel less lonely, and he forgot about the drink. The man was arranging the pieces, placing the tiny, pegged figures in their proper squares. It looked like an expensive set, probably made to order, and Burnham turned his attention to the people themselves.

**T**HEY, too, looked expensive. Burnham forgot about both Peterson and chess, gazing at the couple with the honest admiration of a man who is short, balding, fortyish—and thus very susceptible to the charms of people who are none of those.

The woman sat relaxed and graceful, watching her companion, smiling faintly. Her skin was pale and fine as porcelain. Her hair, like the suit she wore, was velvety black. She was tall and slim, her height accentuated by the hair, long and braided, arranged in coronet fashion around her well-shaped head. The man matched her dark, striking coloring. Hand-

some, thought Burnham, handsome! They had stature and—and—he searched for a word to describe the quality which seemed to hover about the couple, came up with elegance, accepted it reluctantly as the best he could manage.

Seeing an escape from his loneliness, he leaned forward. "Excuse me," he said. "That's a handsome set you have there."

The man glanced up. "Why, thank you." His voice carried a faint foreign accent. "Do you play?"

"Well . . ." Burnham shrugged, "a little. Not much." He made a deprecatory gesture. "I'm no Capablanca!" he added.

The woman smiled politely, and the man said, "Neither am I. Would you care for a game?"

Burnham looked at the woman. "Well, I don't want to intrude."

"Oh, not at all," she protested, her tone spiced with the same vaguely pleasing accent as her companion's. "Truly, I did not care to play."

"Well . . ." he repeated, still hesitating courteously. "If you're sure . . ."

"Oh, quite," said the woman. She looked from him to her companion. "Carl was hoping to find a game."

The man stood up, holding out his hand. "Czerny is the name," he said. "Carl Czerny. This is my wife."

Burnham shook hands with the couple and introduced himself, crossing over to join them. "Czerny." He frowned. "I used to know someone by that name. Sales manager for a few years in the Detroit office. I'm a district supervisor," he explained. "Supple-Sheen Paints, Inc. Czerny—yes, that was his name. Paul, Emil—something like that. Not related, by any chance?"

"No," said the man, shaking his head. "I think not."

"Well," said Burnham, "it's not a name you run across every day. Polish, isn't it?"

"Czech," replied Mr. Czerny.

"Oh, yes! Yes, Czechoslovakia!" Burnham raised an eyebrow at them. "Say," he went on with heavy jocularly. "I'm not in the company of Red spies, am I?"

"Hardly." Czerny smiled, showing strong white teeth. "We're not Reds. We're Blacks. That is," he explained, seeing Burnham's puzzlement, "the name Czerny means Black in our language."

"Oh! I see!" Burnham shook his head. "Too bad my name's not White."

"That *would* be fitting, would it not?" Czerny took a pawn of each color and shuffled them behind his back. "Your choice, sir?"

**B**URNHAM pointed to the left and received White. Pleased, he started to help Czerny arrange

the rest of the pieces. He liked playing White. His defensive game was poor, he knew, and he found himself feeling eager and confident.

"Darling." Mrs. Czerny touched her husband's arm. "Why don't we go to our compartment?" She looked at Burnham. "You could play so much more comfortably there and I would have my knitting while I watch."

Czerny glanced at the other man and Burnham stood up. "Why, sure," he said. "That would be fine!"

"Agreed, then." Mrs. Czerny glowed delightfully and rested her hand briefly on Burnham's sleeve. "So considerate of you."

"Not at all," he beamed. "My pleasure." He followed her slim, willowy figure up the aisle, with Czerny behind him, and they left the club car and moved through the train.

Their compartment was two cars away and, when they reached it, the men seated themselves at the table, while Mrs. Czerny took out a bag of knitting and placed herself where she could watch the game. She made a charming picture sitting there, all black and white, with the bright red of her lips and the red wool in her hands offering a colorful contrast. Burnham decided this was going to be one of his pleasanter trips after all. On the way to the compartment,

he had learned that the Czernys were going all the way through to the Coast.

"Business in New York," Czerny had said. "We're going home after a short visit in San Francisco." Burnham wondered where 'home' was. Europe, perhaps? At any rate, he looked forward to their company. It promised friendship, chess, talk about politics — Peterson came to his mind, and Burnham weighed the thought of confiding in the Czernys, remembering other trips in which brief communions with strangers had often seemed more vital and interesting than old, established friendships.

Czerny had placed the chess set between them and now sat waiting for White's opening. Burnham pursed his lips, whistled a few tuneless notes and tried to recall gambits.

"It's been quite a while since I last played," he apologized.

Work had piled up so steadily during the past four years that he rarely had time for a game. Not like the old days, he thought, back at the Club in New York. The memory of Peterson intruded again and, abruptly, Burnham cut it off by moving his King's Pawn to the fourth rank. Czerny answered by placing his King's Knight at King's Bishop three, and Burnham advanced his Pawn another square, threatening the Knight.

THE next few moments passed with only the soft click of Mrs. Czerny's knitting needles breaking the silence. Czerny's Black Knight galloped across the board, drawing out White Pawns at each position, and Burnham laughed. "If you'll excuse me for saying so," he pointed out, "I don't think much of your defense. Look! You're giving me the center of the board!"

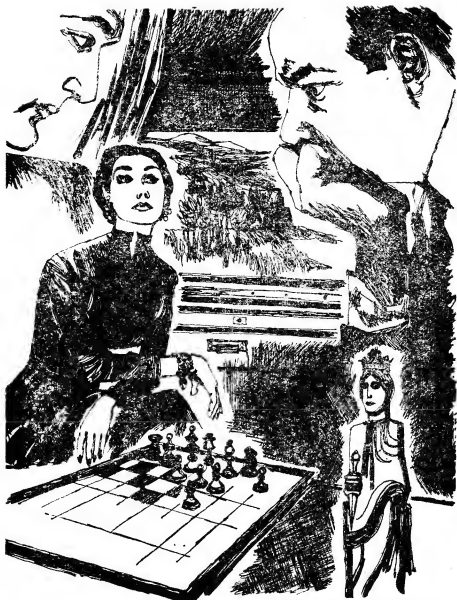
Czerny smiled. "Perhaps." He advanced a Pawn of his own. "When it comes to chess, I fear I am a modernist, wary of wholesale slaughter. I prefer the attack from the wings."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." Burnham studied the board. "Had a friend like that. Played beautiful chess. Poor guy," he added. "My wife wrote me he died last week."

"How distressing," murmured Mrs. Czerny. "A close friend of yours?"

Her husband looked sympathetic. "Surely he did not die of chess!"

"Oddly enough, he did," said Burnham. "Now that I think of it, that's just what *did* kill him." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You see," he went on to explain, "I used to belong to a chess club back in New York. I was crazy about chess in those days. Used to go there and play three, four nights a week regularly. We had some good players there. A couple of masters and a number of men,



like young Peterson, who were really going places. He was the best, though."

He glanced at the Czernys, trying to determine their degree of interest. His host was sitting with his head cocked attentively, the chiseled perfection of his features seeming to invite confidence. Mrs. Czerny, on the other hand, was bent over her knitting, frowning slightly.

"I'm—I'm not boring you, am I?" he asked.

She looked up swiftly. "No, no," she assured him. "My husband and I are most interested. You were saying?"

"He was saying, my dear," Czerny replied, "that he had a young friend named Peterson who played very good chess." He looked at Burnham. "That was the name, sir? Peterson?"

"Peterson. Yes." Burnham reached out to capture a Black Pawn with his King's Pawn. "I first met him about six years ago, when he was twenty and getting ready to set the chess world on its ear. He played like no one I've seen before or since, and everybody at the Club was sure we had the next World's Champion."

Czerny took the advancing White Pawn with his own King's Pawn, and Burnham paused to survey his position before continuing. The two Kings sat facing each other on a completely open file,

and he moved his King's Knight to King's Bishop three.

CZERNY moved his Bishop in front of his King, and Burnham automatically did the same. Czerny castled. White castled.

"Then," Burnham went on, "five years ago, it happened. Peterson entered the New York State Tournament. He sailed through his preliminary rounds with no losses and only one draw. The Club was so damn proud of him we all could have burst right there on the spot. We gave a dinner for him, the night before the final round, and Peterson showed up late. He apologized, said he'd taken a nap and overslept.

"Well, we thought it was swell of him to come at all. He was under a terrific strain and looked pretty tired. He was nervous at dinner, I remember, but he got through it all right. Afterward, we were in the lounge, talking about this and that, mostly chess." He paused to advance a Pawn.

Czerny replied with a threat to his Knight and, for a few minutes, Burnham forgot what he was saying and concentrated on the game. He realized, with an agreeable shock, that he was playing much better than he usually did, and he put his thoughts on the board, parrying threats skillfully and answering with advances of his own.

"So," he continued, while

Czerny studied positions, "we were in the lounge, and Fred Bailey and I were talking to Peterson about the International Tournament coming up. He was going to enter and, with the State title practically in his pocket, we were feeling pretty good about his chances in the next one.

"Well, all of a sudden, the kid went to pieces and started to laugh and talk, laugh and talk. Hysterics. Fortunately, Fred and I were right there. Fred's a doctor, that's why I say fortunately. We got Peterson out of the lounge and into one of the private rooms.

"He was in a bad way, all jitters and giggles. Lord, he looked awful! Fred suggested that we get him home, so I called a cab. We managed to get him out of the Club and over to his apartment without too much fuss. Peterson lived alone. His parents had died a couple of years back, leaving him enough of an income that would see him through college with a bit left over. The only thing he really cared about was chess and, what with the money he had and the way he was mastering the game, he could have gone ahead and earned a tidy living." He shook his head, chewing at his lower lip.

"We used to say he was one of the luckiest and nicest guys that ever lived! Not very handsome, but friendly looking. Kind of shy. There was once a girl . . ." He

shrugged, remembering the girl Peterson had brought to the Christmas dance at the Club, wondering what had happened to her.

"How dreadful!" said Mrs. Czerny. Her face was very pale, and her delicately formed hands rested quietly on the red wool. She looked up, fastening her large dark eyes on Burnham. "It was — nerves?" she asked.

"Nerves." He nodded, glancing at his game. "Nerves and chess, that's what Fred said." He answered Czerny's move by taking his Queen's Bishop.

Czerny advanced a Pawn, offering an exchange of Knights which would put Burnham at a disadvantage. Burnham's Knight, however, was trapped in all directions anyway, so he exchanged, albeit unwillingly. Czerny threatened again with his Pawn, and, when the second skirmish was over, Burnham stopped to count pieces and discovered he had lost three Pawns, a Knight, a Bishop and a Rook, while taking only one Pawn, one Bishop and a Knight. He frowned. Czerny's other Knight and Bishop, supported by the Black Queen, were dangerously grouped for a Kingside attack. Talking, he fumed inwardly, that's what I get for talking!

AS though sensing his thoughts, Czerny pushed the board a little to one side. "Do continue,



Mr. Burnham," he said. "We can finish this later."

"Yes, do," urged Mrs. Czerny.

Burnham smiled. "There isn't much more," he apologized. "But you know how it is. Something like that happening to a swell guy like Peterson—it's hard to get it out of your mind, especially when you know you caused part of it." He frowned. "Probably, by tomorrow, I won't even think about it, but just having got my wife's letter this morning, I . . ."

"You want to talk about it," she finished gently. "We understand. But I don't see why it was *your* fault, Mr. Burnham."

"Well," he replied, "it happened this way. When Fred and I got him home from the Club that night, he started crying and shaking all over. Fred went to the drugstore for a sedative, while I stayed with Peterson. All I could think about was the next morning, when the kid surely would have taken the State Championship, only now, how could he? In his present condition, he couldn't have won a game of tiddlywinks from a ten-year-old!

"I helped him to undress and get into bed, and the kid started talking about dreams he'd been having. That's what was upsetting him, he told me. Imagine! Every night for the last week, he said, he'd been dreaming about chess. Only, instead of dreaming about

little pieces on a board, they were big pieces. In fact, he said they were men and women, full grown, moving around on ranks and files the size of Central Park!

"They went through games, Peterson said, real chess games. The Pawns were boys dressed up like pages at court, with little swords strapped to their side. The Knights wore light armor and carried spears. The Bishops had small flasks of poison. The Rooks . . ." Burnham remembered the description, suddenly, vividly, and toned it down so as not to shock Mrs. Czerny. "The Rooks were men maybe seven feet tall. They didn't carry weapons. They—they used their hands. Each King and Queen had a small dagger, a mister—miser . . ." He frowned. "I forgot what Peterson called it."

"Misericord?" suggested Czerny. "A thin-bladed dagger of the Middle Ages," he explained. "It was generally employed to give the *coup de grâce*." His charming smile flashed briefly. "I am something of a student of medieval times."

"Oh." Burnham nodded. "Yes, I think that's what Peterson called it. Anyhow, in these games, when a piece captured another piece, they—they . . ." He stumbled, wanting to tell it the way Peterson had, but not wanting to upset Mrs. Czerny, who sat pale and unmoving, as though carved from some

strange exotic black and white wood, with even the red of her lips faded and wan.

Again, Czerny came to his rescue, nodding and resting one finger on the miniature board between them, saying, "How symbolic. After all, a piece taken is a piece removed is a piece destroyed, is it not?"

"Is a rose is a rose is a rose," Mrs. Czerny chimed in, coming to life and smiling faintly at her husband. "Darling, *do* let us hear the rest of the story. I am certain there is more."

**B**URNHAM mopped the perspiration on his forehead. Lord! How talking about it brought that night back! "Peterson—he *believed* all this. That was his trouble. I tried to tell him how sometimes, after I'd had a good solid five or six hours of chess, I sometimes dreamed about chessman and games. But he *believed* his dreams. He told me that some place there's a world, or maybe many worlds, where chess is the structure of the society.

"He said in that world men and women move around, living and dying, because we tell them to. He insisted that world had been created by *us*, by people like you and me who play chess. He said that every time a board is taken out, every time a game is started, this other world mirrors the game,

and men and women in it go through the same moves, killing as they capture, or being killed if they're taken."

"Interesting," said Mr. Czerny. He made a tent with his fingers and sat studying them. "Interesting. You know, of course, Mr. Burnham, that chess originated from the sketches made by generals in warfare of days long gone."

"Darling." Mrs. Czerny laid her hand on his fingers. "Not now." She smiled at Burnham. "Please go on," she said.

Burnham saw that Czerny looked a bit perturbed, and decided he'd better finish the story, finish his game and leave. He didn't want to get caught in any family bickering! "Well, Fred came back along about then and made Peterson take more pills. The kid begged us not to leave. He said he was afraid to fall asleep. We agreed to stay with him for the night and promised to wake him if he seemed to be having nightmares.

"So we called our wives to tell them where we were and, almost immediately, Peterson fell asleep. When Fred and I went to the kitchen to make some coffee, I repeated what the kid had told me. We were sitting there, drinking coffee to keep awake and discussing the situation, when the kid screamed.

"We raced into the bedroom. We'd left a small light on, and

we saw him all huddled up in a corner of the bed, shaking and white as a ghost. He held his arms up in front of him, as if he was trying to keep something away and, when he saw us, he just folded over. He was crying over and over, 'Don't let her get me. Don't let her get me!'

"Fred started talking calmly to him while we straightened out the bed. We could see he'd thrashed around quite a lot in his nightmare. Fred just kept talking to him and it was pretty awful. We tried to tell him it was just nerves, that he was under a strain because of the tournament and that he'd be fine once it was over—but he just shook his head, whispering that we didn't believe him. Finally, Fred said it was obvious the kid couldn't play in the morning, and I said I'd call the officials and explain to them.

"WELL, Peterson sort of pulled himself together a little then, and said he didn't want us to do that. He knew how much the Club thought of him, and he was ashamed for breaking down like that. Anyhow, in spite of what he believed about the game, he *wanted* to play in the morning, he *wanted* to win. After all, chess was his whole life. That's where the battle was—inside him. He believed all those crazy things he'd told me and, at the same time, he knew he

could beat any other player in the world, if he'd *stop* believing it was a game of flesh and blood, instead of wood and ivory.

"We sat up the rest of the night with him. We talked about anything we could think of, so long as it wasn't chess. Along about dawn, he fell asleep again, and we stayed close to him this time, smoking and talking softly, so as not to disturb him. He didn't seem to be dreaming, so we just sat and watched.

"We woke him up in time to have a shower and eat some breakfast before going to the tournament. He seemed much better. That little sleep he'd had did him a lot of good. His jitters were gone, and he apologized for all the trouble he'd been, and admitted that we were right and that he'd been wrong.

"Fred and I were still in our dinner jackets from the evening before, and we both needed shaves and some sleep, so Peterson said he'd go on alone. He sounded all right and acted fine, so we wished him luck and he left. I went back to the bedroom for my cigarettes."

Burnham swore and struck his knee with one fist. "It's all my fault!" he cried. "If I hadn't found the damn thing, the kid would have been great! He'd have sailed through that final round like . . ."

"Thing?" Mr. Czerny sat up a little straighter. "*You* found a—

thing, Mr. Burnham? What sort of thing?"

"A tiny chess piece, a queen. It was maybe half an inch high, made out of jade. I kicked it with my foot when I went to the bedroom for my cigarettes, and I heard it roll off the carpet onto the wood floor. I picked it up and showed it to Fred. At first, we thought it was part of a miniature set, because of its size. But, instead of being pegged, it had a tiny hole bored through it, like it might have been strung on something and fallen loose.

"Well, we both knew Peterson was superstitious and we figured the jade queen was a good luck charm of his. We got kind of worried. We thought maybe, if he got to the tournament and discovered it was missing, he might blow up again and not be able to play.

"Fred, being a doctor, had to get to his office, so I grabbed a taxi, dinner jacket and all, and hurried over to the tournament. I arrived only a few minutes after Peterson. He was getting ready to sit down and play and I knew that, once the game started, I wouldn't be able to talk to him or disturb him in any way, so I pushed my way through the crowd and handed him the jade queen."

**B**URNHAM reached for his handkerchief and mopped his forehead again. Mr. Czerny was

watching him intently. Mrs. Czerny had leaned back against the cushioned seat, one hand at her throat, playing with the top button of her suit jacket. "Well, instead of saying thanks, or—or anything, well, he just stood there, staring at the thing.

"I said, 'What's the matter? I found it in your bedroom. It's yours, isn't it?'"

"He shook his head.

"I said, 'Well, gosh, I'm sorry I came busting in. I should have known you wouldn't need any charms to win.' I wished him luck again and reached out to take the thing back.

"Peterson tightened his hand over the little queen and said, 'I happen to know who it does belong to.'

"I said, 'Oh, well, you can return it when you get through here.'

"Peterson said, 'I'm through now,' and looked around the room. He looked at the master he was supposed to play, sitting there, waiting for him to start the game. He looked at the officials, who were getting a little impatient with the delay. He looked at all the people who were waiting to see him win and finally he looked at me.

"His eyes were big and glassy, and he said, 'Remember when you came in last night, you and Fred? I was dreaming about the Black

Queen,' he said. 'She was standing right there in my bedroom. She had a dagger in her hand and she said to me, "You have told our secrets and you are very wicked." She raised the dagger and I screamed. She got scared, I guess, and disappeared. Then you and Fred came in and found me.'

"Peterson held up the little jade queen. 'This is hers,' he said. 'She was wearing a necklace of tiny chessmen. This picce must have dropped off the chain, somehow. That's why you found it where you did, in my bedroom.' He grabbed my arm, and I got a little scared because I hadn't realized how strong he was. 'Last night,' Peterson said, 'you and Fred almost convinced me that my dreams were just nightmares, brought on by nerves. But now I have *this*,' he said, holding up the little queen, 'and I know I was right! *Now* will you believe me? *Now* will you believe the truth about this game?'

"I just stood there, kicking myself all over the place for having brought that thing to him, and Peterson saw I still didn't believe him and he got mad. 'All right,' he shouted. 'I'll tell everybody! *Everybody! Someone's* got to believe me!'

"He jumped up on that chair that was waiting for him and kicked the chessboard off the table, scattering the pieces. He stood on

the table and started waving his arms, pointing to that little queen, yelling out the same crazy story he'd told me the night before.

"Everybody backed away from him. The tournament officials were running around helplessly. They didn't know what to do. Nobody did.

"SOMEBODY finally grabbed him and pulled him down off the table. He fought. They were going to call the police, but I made them call a doctor instead. That was what he needed, a doctor. I—I never saw Peterson again. The last view I had of him was when they carried him out of there, about an hour later. The doctor had shot him full of some sedative. He was in a strait-jacket, and his head kind of—kind of wobbled." Burnham cleared his throat and wiped his hand across his mouth.

"I don't know how they managed to keep it out of the papers. The reporters were very decent. They called it a 'mental breakdown' and didn't make too much of a story out of it. The people who had come to watch the game had mostly been on Peterson's side in the first place, so *they* never talked about it much. All in all, with the way it was hushed up, I guess maybe Fred and I are the only ones who ever knew the whole story."

"How dreadful!" murmured

Mrs. Czerny. Her eyes were half-closed, and her hand rested quietly at her throat.

"What a terrible experience to happen to anyone," said Mr. Czerny.

"And Peterson?" she asked. "What did he do then?"

"He didn't do anything," Burnham answered. "He was committed to an asylum almost immediately. They let him keep the little jade queen. He insisted he had to return it to someone, and he became violent whenever they tried to take it from him. So they let him keep it but, outside of that trinket, he never touched another chess piece in the past five years. He died last week. Poor devil got hold of a knife somehow and . . ."

"Poor man!" sighed Mrs. Czerny, taking up her knitting again. "So you said. Last Tuesday, wasn't it? How very sad!"

"Tuesday?" Burnham looked puzzled. "Why, I don't—"

"Well, well," said Mr. Czerny, sitting up abruptly and pulling their unfinished game forward. "Your move, I believe."

Dutifully, Burnham bent his head over the board. Tuesday? He couldn't remember. Had his wife written him it was Tuesday? Now that the story had been told, he felt tired. He realized that, while talking about it might have some future benefits, it had certainly de-

pressed him for the time being. He was aware that the Czernys were exchanging a glance, and he felt annoyed with himself for having bothered them with such an unpleasant tale about someone they didn't even know. Tuesday? he wondered again. He must look it up in the letter. Later, he promised himself. You've got a game to win.

CZERNY'S Knight had forked his King's Rook. He could remove the Knight by taking him with—

"You know," Mrs. Czerny's voice broke into his thoughts, "I shouldn't blame myself for what happened, if I were you, Mr. Burnham."

"Hmmm?" He looked up at her. "I beg your pardon?" He could remove the Knight by—

"I mean," she said, knitting rapidly, "suppose the story *were* true. Suppose the Black Queen *had* visited Peterson while he slept, showing him the world he never—" she smiled charmingly—"forgive the phrase—the world he never dreamed existed. That would put quite a different light on the poor man's history, would it not?"

Remove the Knight by taking him with the Pawn in front of the Rook. Burnham held onto the thought while he answered her. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he said politely, wishing she would

let him concentrate on the game.

"Well," she elaborated, "let's say it was true." Her slim white fingers raced with the needles. "Peterson, knowing about the world of the chess people, would represent a threat, would he not? For, if *he* believed, he might persuade others to believe. Think of all the gentle chess players! How would they feel, knowing they were slaughtering living people every time they removed a Pawn or a Knight or a Queen?" She pursed her lips, examining her work critically. "Don't you suppose laws might be passed? Banning chess?"

Burnham sighed and looked longingly at the board. "I'm afraid I don't follow you." Take the Knight with the Pawn. Black's Bishop captures Pawn. Mate! No, no! Advance the White Rook one square! He perked up. Would that let him escape?

"Quite simple," Mrs. Czerny went on. "With chess forbidden, the world of the chess people would cease to exist. *They* would cease to exist. Terrible as their lives might seem to men like Peterson, like yourself, surely *that* would be an even more dreadful destiny. The other way, at least, they have some sort of survival rate and, when one is born to live dangerously, one learns to savor the sensation. But to stop their world completely!" She

shook her head and sucked in her breath. "No," she said. "I feel the Black Queen was wholly justified in trying to silence your poor Mr. Peterson."

Burnham stared at her. "But why?" he demanded. "Why would she tell Peterson in the first place, if it was so dangerous for her?"

Mrs. Czerny shrugged. "Whim," she said shortly. "Anticipation of an interesting situation, perhaps. Mere curiosity, if you like, to see what he would do, how he would feel." She laid her knitting aside, folding her hands. "She might not have realized the possibility of its ending as it did."

**B**URNHAM snorted. "*Whim!*" He turned back to his game. "On a whim, she makes a poor kid crazy, so that he winds up in an asylum putting a knife in his heart! Some whim!" He could advance the White Rook to King's Knight three. He realized unhappily that would do no good. Black's next move would be to take the Rook. All White could do then would be to move the King and, in the next plays, the Bishop would retreat, the Queen would advance and it would be checkmate. Fretting, he tried to find a way out.

"Let us carry the supposition further," said Czerny. "Let us suppose that the Black Queen *did* do exactly that, for whatever injudicious reason she might have had.

The authorities in her world—let us carry the chess metaphor still further,” he added gently. “Call them the Officials. The Officials, then, would be rather displeased with her actions. For a time, they would be mollified by Peterson’s ‘breakdown,’ feeling a greater security in the knowledge that human beings thought him insane.

“But, alas, some weeks after the unfortunate incident in the bedroom, the loss of the jade piece is discovered. Imagine, if you can, the consternation at this discovery! For—” Mr. Czerny hesitated—“you might as well know that it was not made of jade at all, but a substance not found on earth. You see, with the little queen in his possession, Peterson might at any time suspect the foreign nature of the material, demand an analysis and be able to convince some other human of the truth of his story.”

Burnham kept his eyes on the board, anger rising inside him. It’s a trick, he thought, a trick to keep me from concentrating on the game, like blowing smoke in an opponent’s face, or whistling, or tapping. Jaws clamped tight, he decided he didn’t think much of the Czernys after all.

“The Officials,” continued Mr. Czerny calmly, “would then send the Black Queen to retrieve the missing part of her necklace.” He stroked the side of his aristocratic

nose with one long slim finger. “Of course,” he added, “she would be suitably escorted.”

**A**H! Burnham forgot his irritation and stopped listening. There *was* a way out! Instead of taking the Knight, he would put his own Knight at King four, threatening Black’s Queen! Then, when Czerny took the White Queen, the Knight would capture the other one, relieving the pressure on that diagonal and permitting the White King to escape. On the other hand, if Czerny chose to move his Queen, rather than let her be captured, the pressure would *still* be removed. Gloating, he reached for the Knight.

“And,” Czerny went on, watching the move idly, “since the Black Queen and her escort could make their appearance on earth only through the use of a chess player as a sort of medium and, since they did not know the unfortunate young man’s name, their appearance was geographically dislocated, and the subsequent search for him was both bothersome and wearying, isolated as he was in an asylum, and grossly averse to the sight of a chess piece.”

“Not too wearying, darling.” Mrs. Czerny smiled. “They might look upon the trip as a sort of vacation.”

“So they might.” Czerny leaned over to study the positions on the



board. "At any rate," he went on, "you really needn't blame yourself, Mr. Burnham. After having found Peterson and gained access to him—they would have ways, you know. Perhaps Peterson was only too glad to see them and get rid of the little trinket. Perhaps, after having his entire career lost to him, for he was a man of sensitivity and could not consider ever continuing his passion for the game—perhaps, there, at the end, he asked them to kill him.

"They didn't want to. They were rather sorry for him, and they did it—as a favor, as—the *coup de grâce* administered to a sufferer they had inadvertently wounded. After all," Czerny pointed out, "how else would he get hold of a knife in such a place? It would be interesting, Mr. Burnham, if you knew whether or not the little queen was still in his possession when he died last Tuesday."

Burnham looked up from the board. His anger was fading, and he felt a drop of perspiration slide slowly down his back. "What do you mean?"

Czerny was hunched over the table, his face stern and bitter. He pointed to the two menaced Queens. "What do *you* mean?" he asked. "My Queen? *My* Queen?" He glared up at Burnham. "You fool! Don't you see the Black Rook? The Queen has

nothing to do with this mate! You—you would slaughter that Queen for no good purpose?"

**B**URNHAM sat motionless. He glanced at the door. He wished mightily that he had ordered that drink in the club car and never spoken to the Czernys.

Mrs. Czerny leaned forward, her beautifully molded features void of expression as she studied the board. "Poor Queen!" she murmured. "It would be most unchivalrous to take her."

"Resign," said Czerny. "Your position is hopeless. Don't force the sacrifice of two Queens."

Damn them, thought Burnham. It was a trick! Fine people! His King would be perfectly safe after they traded Queens, and Czerny knew it. He was just trying to trick him into losing. He felt vastly relieved that no money had been wagered on the game. That's probably how they make their living, he thought suddenly. Luring strangers into games. What a sucker he was! He saw it all so clearly now. They had taken his story about poor Peterson and twisted it around so that . . . His eyes narrowed. "It's your play," he said coldly.

Czerny, his lips pressed into a thin, tight line, took the White Queen with his Knight. Burnham captured the Black Queen. Czerny advanced his Knight, taking a

Pawn. Burnham removed the Knight with his Rook, and then, too late, he saw the trap. It hadn't been the Queen, after all. It had been the combination of Black Rook and Black Bishop, just as Czerny had said. Unhappily, he watched the White Rook fall. He moved his Knight desperately, but he was out of position. Another Pawn fell, and that was that.

"Well," Burnham sighed, "that's mate, all right. I do like to go down fighting, but you've got me."

"Yes," said Mr. Czerny, taking the thin-bladed dagger from the sheath in his belt. "I have indeed."

"One moment, darling," murmured Mrs. Czerny, unbuttoning the top of her jacket.

The last thing Joseph Burnham saw clearly was the green necklace on her throat, and he did not go down fighting after all.

*Jason M. Jones*

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